Stranger Twins 2 by bgtbgtbgbgt

Series: Stranger Twins [4]
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Genre: F/M, M/M
Language: English
Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Dustin Henderson, Eddie Kaspbrak, Jonathan Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Hanlon, Mike Wheeler, Richie Tozier, Scott Clarke, Stanley Uris, Ted Wheeler, Will Byers
Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler
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Summary:

Sequel to Stranger Twins

Mike and Richie are now 16 years old and dealing with the aftermath of Eleven's disappearance.

Established Reddie with Mileven. Follows the basic premise of ST2 with added Richie commentary and Reddie moments.

1. MADMAX

“Shit!”

“Woah, 751,300!” Richie whistled, peering over the shoulder of the short girl who was busy kicking the Dig Dug machine. “High score, nice one!”

The girl stopped kicking the machine to look up at Richie. She had long hair that reminded him vaguely of Beverly’s, although not quite as shiny or nicely quaffed.

“Richie Wheeler,” Richie grinned, extending his right hand towards the scowling girl. She looked down at it briefly before looking back up at Richie, continuing to scowl. Richie raised his eyebrows and continued to smile at the girl, refusing to back down.

“Max,” she groaned, grabbing Richie’s hand and giving it a quick, single shake before turning back to the machine to enter her name next to her score.

“Man, Dustin’s gonna shit when he finds out you beat his high score,” Richie laughed, watching the screen over the girl’s shoulder.

“Dustin?” Max asked, eyebrows raising in question.

“Yeah,” Richie pointed to Dustin’s name below Max’s on the screen. “He’s my brother’s friend. Total dweeb.”

“Huh,” Max responded disinterestedly, feeding another quarter into the machine to restart the game.

“So… You’re new in town,” Richie commented.

“Yup,” Max responded, eyes not leaving the screen in front of her.

“Cool. We don’t get many new people in Hawkins. Where ya from?” Richie asked, leaning back against the Ms. Pac-Man machine to Max’s left.

“None of your business.”

“Woah, okay,” Richie laughed, raising his hands in feigned innocence. “Just asking.”

“Fuck!” Max exclaimed, smacking the machine as she lost. “California.”

“No shit! You’re from California? That’s awesome!” Richie’s face lit up in excitement despite the scowl Max was directing his way.

“Yeah, I guess,” Max responded, signalling for Richie to move out of the way so she could play Ms. Pac-Man.

“What’s it like?”

“Sunny.”

“No way,” Richie snorted, enjoying the girl’s sarcasm. “So, I’m assuming you’re gonna go to Hawkins High,” Richie commented, changing the subject.

“Seems to be the only high school this goddamn town has so, yeah,” Max responded drily.

“Nice, well you should eat lunch with my friends and I on Monday.”

“Thanks, but no thanks, dude.”

“Okay, just thought you might want someone to eat-”

“Listen, you’re nice,” Max interrupted, turning to Richie and abandoning her game. “And I guess you’re cute, but I’m not interested. Take a hint, buddy.”

“I’m not hitting on you,” Richie snorted.

“Sure, you aren’t,” Max rolled her eyes, turning back to the game just in time to save herself from a ghost.”

“Believe me,” Richie drawled, still snorting with laughter. “You’re not my type.”

“I’m not?” Max asked, abandoning her game once again and glaring

at Richie, feeling almost offended.

“Not even close,” Richie responded, face lighting up as his gaze drifted to something over Max’s shoulder.

Max turned to look, watching as a short boy walked towards them with a grin.

“Hey, Rich,” Eddie smiled.

“Hi, baby,” Richie grinned, looming over his boyfriend once Eddie was close enough and pressing a kiss to the other boy’s lips.

“Oh,” Max gasped quietly.

Richie straightened up and both boys turned to look at her. Richie smiling smugly and Eddie glaring defensively.

“Got a problem?”

“No, no, no,” Max rushed, cheeks turning slightly pink under Eddie’s harsh stare. “Just surprised.”

“Spaghetti, this is Max,” Richie introduced.

“It’s Eddie,” Eddie clarified as Max stared at him in confusion. “You’re an asshole. Don’t introduce me like that!” Eddie glared up at his boyfriend.

“Technically I didn’t introduce-…” Richie trailed off, voice quieting as Eddie’s glare hardened.

“So, Max, was it?”

“Yeah,” Max nodded, tucking her hair behind one of her ears, suddenly appearing quite nervous. “I just moved here.”

“Interesting,” Eddie responded in a disinterested tone.

“Eds,” Richie laughed, ruffling Eddie’s hair. “Chill, babe.”

“What?” Eddie asked, looking up at his boyfriend with feigned innocence.

“You know what,” Richie reprimanded playfully. “Be nice, Max is cool.”

“Sorry,” Eddie muttered, giving Max a little smile as his cheeks turned pink.

“It’s okay,” Max smiled back. “I’m assuming you go to Hawkins High too?”

Eddie nodded.

“He does indeed,” Richie added enthusiastically. “Spaghetti, guess what! Max is from California!”

“Really?” Eddie asked, turning to her in excitement. The girl nodded embarrassedly. “Sorry, we’re being weird. It’s just, California’s pretty exotic by Hawkins' standards.”

“Yeah,” Richie agreed. “We’re gonna move to LA after we graduate.”

“LA?” Max repeated, nose scrunching slightly.

“What’s wrong with LA?”

“I dunno, just really busy and kinda dirty,” Max explained lightly. “I’m from San Fransisco so I’m a little biased…”

“That’s so cool,” Richie breathed, staring at Max in amazement.

“That I’m from San Francisco?”

“Yeah.”

Max snorted at Richie’s response before tensing at the sound of a revving engine in the parking lot.

“Well, I gotta go,” Max explained hurriedly, face flushing as she turned for the door. “See you guys around.”

“Bye, Max.”

“That lunch offer still stands!” Richie called, Max nodded in response before ducking her head and pushing the door to the arcade open.

“So, Max?” Eddie asked lightly, staring up at Richie and picking lint off of his boyfriend’s wrinkled shirt.

“She seems cool, huh?”

“Yeah, cool,” Eddie responded in a flat voice.

“No, no, no, no! I hate this overpriced *bullshit*!”

“Hey, shitheads,” Richie called across the arcade towards his brother and his group of friends surrounding the Dragon Slayer machine. “Quiet the fuck down!”

Dustin raised a middle finger in Richie’s general direction, as Lucas proceeded to goad Dustin.

“Whatever, I’m still tops on Centipede and Dig Dug!”

“Guess you didn’t hear the news,” Richie snorted, approaching the group of boys.

“What news?”

Richie grinned at Dustin, wiggling his eyebrows causing Dustin to groan.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” he whined, pushing a chuckling Richie aside as he rushed towards the Dig Dug machine. “No, no, no, no, no! No! No! No!”

“751, 300 points!” Will read, laughing with astonishment.

“That’s fucking impossible,” Mike mused, squinting at the screen in interest.

“Who the *shit* is Mad Max?” Dustin demanded, glaring at Richie.

“Better than you,” Richie snorted, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the Ms. Pac-Man machine in a similar fashion to

the day before when he met the very person in question.

Dustin raised another middle finger at Richie, giving him a dirty look and causing Richie to bark with laughter.

“Is it you?”

“Fuck, no,” Mike laughed, looking at Will incredulously. “Richie’s shit at arcade games.”

“I resent that,” Richie guffawed. “They just haven’t invented the right game for me yet.”

Mike shot his brother a patronizing look.

“Then who is it?” Lucas interrupted the twins’ back and forth.

“You want information, then I need something in return,” Richie replied ominously.

“Fuck off, Wheeler,” Dustin groaned. “Just tell me what you want and I'll do it.”

“Nah,” Richie laughed, pushing away from the Ms. Pac-Man machine and heading towards the prize counter, the party following him like a pack of puppies.

“C’mon, Richie,” Dustin whined. “Please!”

“Well,” Richie started, leaning against the counter and squinting at Dustin. “Maybe…”

“Anything!”

“Nevermind,” Richie winked, pushing off the counter and throwing the *Be Back in 5 Minutes* sign that Richie’s manager insisted he use when he went on breaks on the countertop. He was thoroughly enjoying holding Mad Max's identity over Dustin. “See ya later, nerds.”

“Fuck you, Richie,” Dustin exclaimed as the rest of the group groaned and slunk away to the machines to spend the rest of their quarters.

“Will?” Eddie called across the parking lot as he approached the arcade, where he was meeting up with Richie. “Hey, Will!”

The short, skinny boy continued to stare into space, a look of pure terror on his face.

“Will!” Eddie shouted again, jogging up to the boy. “Will, hey! Woah, it’s okay! It’s just me.”

“H-h-hey, Eddie,” Will swallowed, blinking as his chest began to rise and fall rapidly.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Will nodded, looking up at the Palace Arcade sign in the parking lot. “I just… needed some air.”

“Alright,” Eddie nodded, squeezing his friend’s shoulder nervously.

Over the past year Eddie and Will had become incredibly close. Initially, their friendship blossomed from a shared experience of bullying and being taunted for being gay, although Will had never confirmed his sexuality. It then grew stronger as Will shared his feelings of suffocation as his mother became increasingly protective of him, a feeling Eddie was all too familiar with.

“Well, I’m going inside. You coming?”

“Y-yeah,” Will nodded before shaking his head to clear his thoughts. “Let’s go.”

“Hey, there you are Will!” Mike called across the arcade, waving his friend over. “You’re up on Dig Dug!”

Eddie followed Will towards the group of boys, pushing up onto his toes as he scanned the arcade for his boyfriend.

“Where’s Richie?” Eddie asked the boys, still scanning the arcade.

“The fuckhead went on break,” Dustin grumbled.

“Hey,” Eddie laughed, throwing Dustin a pointed look for insulting Richie. “Watch it!”

“Okay, what is Newton’s First Law?”

“C’mon, Rich,” Eddie laughed, throwing his head back as the two walked hand in hand towards school, testing each other for their upcoming physics test. “At least *try* to give me a hard one!”

“Oh, I’ll give you a hard one,” Richie joked, leaning over to bite Eddie’s shoulder playfully before pressing a kiss to Eddie’s cheek and straightening up as they entered the school parking lot.

“Hilarious,” Eddie drawled. “Alright, Newton’s First Law states that- oh, my God!”

“Ow, ow, ow,” Richie squawked, trying to pull his arm from Eddie’s sudden grasp. “Ow, Eds, release! Release!”

“Sorry,” Eddie murmured, staring distractedly at the blue Camaro that had just come roaring into the student parking lot.

“Shit, Eds,” Richie moaned, shaking his arm dramatically.

“Rich, look at that car!” Eddie gushed, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet.

“The blue one?” Richie asked, rubbing his arm as he followed Eddie’s gaze. “Yeah, it’s cool.”

“Cool? Cool?!” Eddie squawked, giving his boyfriend a shocked look. “Richie, it’s fucking beautiful! Oh, my God!”

“Chill, Spaghetti,” Richie laughed, placing his hands on each of Eddie’s shoulders and pressing him down to the ground to stop his bouncing. “Or everyone’s gonna see your car boner.”

“Shut up, Richie,” Eddie smacked at Richie distractedly, still staring at the Camaro as its occupants exited the vehicle.

“Hey, it’s Max,” Richie commented, watching as the redhead exited the car and took off towards the school on her skateboard.

“Hm?” Eddie hummed distractedly, eyes following the tight, denim-clad ass of the driver.

“Hey!” Richie whined, pouting at Eddie dramatically when he noticed the hungry look on Eddie’s face.

“Oh, get over it,” Eddie laughed, patting Richie’s cheek. “You’re cute too.”

“Cute?” Richie guffawed. “I’m cute?! You’re supposed to say I’m the sexiest man to have ever walked the earth!”

“Bit of an overstatement, don’t you think, babe?” Eddie responded playfully.

“I’m hurt,” Richie pouted, crossing his arms over his chest like a petulant child. “You’ve really wounded me this time, Eds.”

“Want me to kiss it better, babe?”

A small smirk tugged at Richie’s lips. He loved when Eddie was in a playful mood.

“Uh huh,” Richie nodded, pushing his lips back into a pout.

“Where’s it hurt?” Eddie cooed, wrapping his arms around Richie’s neck and pushing himself up onto his toes. Richie pointed at his cheek. “Muah, better?” Richie shook his head no. “Where else, baby?” Richie pointed at his lips which were twitching with a smile. “Muah,” Eddie smacked his lips dramatically.

“Much better,” Richie grinned once Eddie pulled away.

“Good.”

“Hey, you two!” Stan called across the parking lot from his spot with

Mike and Ben by the school. “Quit sucking face, we’ve got class!”

“Well, good morning to you too, Staniel,” Richie quipped, approaching the three boys with his arm thrown over Eddie’s shoulder.

“I’m still disappointed in you for dating this buffoon,” Stan spoke to Eddie, ignoring Richie entirely.

“I’ve already told you I’m sorry, Stan!” Eddie joked. “It’s been three years though, you gotta accept it.”

“Never,” Stan continued dramatically. “I had such high hopes for you…”

“Hey, Will!” Eddie smiled, leaning on the locker next to Will’s and peering over his friend’s shoulder. “What’s that?”

“N-nothing,” Will rushed, trying to shove the article he had been holding into his locker.

“Hey, wait,” Eddie grabbed for the piece of paper, pulling it from Will’s grasp. He stared down at the article about Will’s disappearance the previous year that was defaced with various slurs. “Fucking assholes.”

“Eddie, it’s okay-”

“No, it’s not okay, Will!” Eddie interrupted, cheeks pink with anger as he scanned the hallway, glaring at anyone who made eye contact with him, as though accusing them of putting the article in Will’s locker. “It’s fucking rude!”

“Eddie, calm down,” Will continued, giving Eddie a meaningful look. “*Please.*”

“Sorry,” Eddie sighed, readjusting the straps of his backpack and shaking his head as though clearing his head of his previous thoughts.

“So, where’s your shadow?”

“Richie had to go see Coleman before class,” Eddie explained, playing with his fingers self-consciously as though he didn’t know what to do with his hands in such a situation if they weren’t holding onto Richie’s.

“What’d he do this time?” Will laughed, slamming his locker shut and turning to walk down the hall towards Mr. Clarke’s class with Eddie in tow.

“Who knows,” Eddie sighed, shaking his head. “The idiot’s a train wreck. *I* can’t even keep up with all the shit he causes.”

“If *you* can’t keep up with him, we’re all doomed,” Will joked as they entered the classroom.

“Yeah, I wish you all luck in weathering Hurricane Richie’s storm,” Eddie grinned, sliding into his seat.

“Talking about me?” Richie called across the classroom as he entered from the hallway, approaching the two boys with Ben who had his nose in a book. “Good things, I hope?”

“I was just telling Will about your weird nipples,” Eddie teased, smirking up at Richie who was now standing over him.

“You little shit. You’re lucky you’re cute,” Richie grumbled playfully, bending down to peck Eddie’s forehead before taking his seat behind Eddie’s.

“I know,” Eddie shot back cheekily.

“Ugh, can you two *please* turn down the cheesiness,” Mike grumbled, throwing himself down into his seat in front of Will with a scowl on his face. “It’s 9 a-fucking-m.”

“Ah, the prodigal son has returned to bio,” Richie boomed. “How was your week away, Mr. Wheeler? Was the honeymoon behind the dumpsters with Big Bill romantic?”

“Fuck off,” Mike groaned.

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bunk bed,” Richie joked, smiling at Will and Eddie as Mike continued to scowl.

“Shut up, Richie,” Mike grumbled, hunching over to use his backpack as a pillow on the top of his desk.

“Sonofabitch, Richie,” Dustin shouted, entering the classroom with Lucas and sitting down in his front row desk before turning to look back at Richie. “Would you just tell me who the fuck Mad Max is?”

“Not a chance,” Richie laughed as Eddie rolled his eyes, shaking his head and pulling out his notebook for class.

“Please?!”

“Let me think about that… nope.”

“Goddammit, Richie,” Dustin groaned. “You are no help, you know that?”

“Alright, everyone,” Mr. Clarke called as he entered the classroom, Max following. “We have a new student today!”

Max grimaced, shifting from foot to foot as she stared at the ground, facing burning with embarrassment.

“Please welcome, all the way from sunny California,” Mr. Clarke began excitedly. “The latest passenger to join us on our curiosity voyage, Maxine!”

“It’s Max, actually,” Max said quietly, pushing some of her hair behind her ear as she continued to stare intently at her shoes.

Dustin gasped, turning to look at Richie with wide eyes. Richie shrugged, a half smile on his face.

“Well, all aboard, Max,” Mr. Clarke grinned, ever the kind and gentle teacher. “Why don’t you take that empty seat over by Richie?”

Max looked up at the class for the first time, surprised to see Richie grinning widely at her just behind Eddie who was also shooting her a reassuring smile. Max nodded and moved to sit in the seat next to

Richie's.

"Hey, Max!" Richie exclaimed, embarrassing Max slightly.

"Hi," Max nodded, swallowing as the party all twisted in their seats to stare at her, making her feel slightly self-conscious.

"Alright, today we're gonna get started on chapter nine," Mr. Clarke continued, pulling a stack of hand-outs from his bag. "I have these worksheets for you guys to work on in pairs."

As Mr. Clarke walked up and down the aisles, handing each student a worksheet Max turned to Richie, eyes wild and panicked.

"Can we work together?"

"Oh," Richie said, eyebrows raised in surprised. "Um," he started, looking towards Eddie who was twisting in his seat to face Richie. "Uh… Eds and I usually work together, but… Um, do you mind if I partner with Max today, Spaghetti?"

"Oh... yeah," Eddie swallowed, looking between Max and Richie. Richie was shooting him an apologetic look, clearly conveying his guilt. "That's fine. I'll just work with W-" Eddie turned to look at Will who was already working with Mike.

"Haystack probably needs a partner, Eds," Richie said quietly, nodding his head towards Ben on the other side of the classroom.

"Perfect," Eddie murmured. He pushed himself out of his seat, ruffling Richie's hair as he passed his boyfriend.

"Love you," Richie said in a quiet voice, leaning back to look up at Eddie as he passed, making Eddie smile.

"Hey, Ben," Eddie greeted once he was close enough.

"Oh, hey, Eddie," Ben smiled, looking up from his worksheet in surprise. "What's up?"

"Wanna work together?"

“What about Richie?” Ben asked, eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

“He’s working with Max today,” Eddie explained, trying to keep the hurt out of his voice. He knew it was ridiculous to be feeling jealous of Max and Richie working on their biology assignment together. “She doesn’t really know anyone so Rich agreed to work with her.”

“Oh, well that’s nice of him,” Ben smiled.

“It is, isn’t it?” Eddie smiled, grabbing the seat from the desk in front of Ben's and turning it around so he could work at Ben’s desk as well. Eddie turned to look across the room, watching as Max laughed at something Richie had said, a pang of jealousy reverberating through his chest.

“Guess who,” Richie whispered into Eddie’s ear, leaning down to cover Eddie’s eyes with one of his hands.

“Please be Johnny Depp, please be Johnny Depp,” Eddie stage-whispered, causing Richie to squawk in mock outrage as he removed his hand and threw himself down next to Eddie. “Oh, hey, Rich,” Eddie laughed, leaning over to kiss his cheek.

“Mm,” Riche grabbed Eddie’s chin before he could pull away, pressing their lips together. “Hi, baby,” he murmured against Eddie’s lips as they pulled away, Eddie’s cheeks flaming as his eyes darted around the cafeteria nervously.

The sound of someone clearing their throat brought Richie back to the task at hand.

“Oh!” Richie smiled, pulling away from Eddie further to sit up straight. “This is Max! Max, these are the Losers!” Richie introduced as Max sat on the other side of Richie.

“Um, hi,” Max smiled, setting her lunch on the table and looking nervously at the teenagers around her.

“I’m Bev,” Beverly grinned, waving at the girl slightly. The other four boys followed suit, properly introducing themselves.

“And you already know, Mr. Edward Spagedward over here,” Richie chimed in, pulling Eddie into his side tightly.

“Rich,” Eddie groaned, pushing his boyfriend away slightly.

“He loves me, really,” Richie explained to Max conspiratorially. “Just doesn’t like to admit it.”

“That’s not even true,” Eddie scoffed, taking Richie’s obvious bait.

“Yeah, yeah,” Stan interrupted, wanting to stop the ensuing argument that would likely dominate the conversation for their entire lunch hour. “Richie loves Eddie, Eddie loves Richie. They’re both gross and in love. We know. God, you two argue about everything.”

“We do not,” Eddie protested, ready to begin bickering with Stan as Richie nodded along to back up his boyfriend.

“Don’t worry, Max,” Beverly laughed, noticing Max looking at Eddie. “I swear Eddie’s total a sweetheart.”

“Yeah, but he’s also a little firecracker,” Richie added, causing Eddie to blush and glare up at Richie angrily.

“Shut the fuck up,” Eddie pouted, face scrunched and arms crossing over his chest.

“Aw, my little firecracker,” Richie continued, wrapping his arms around Eddie and pulling him closer so he could press kisses all over Eddie’s face, causing the smaller boy to protest.

“Completely insufferable,” Stan groaned, shaking his head at the two.

“Leave them alone,” Ben cooed, watching the two boys fondly. “They’re cute.”

“Hey, Max,” Mike Hanlon said, nodding his head across the cafeteria towards the table where Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Max were sitting. “Looks like you’ve got some admirers.”

“What?” Max asked, face scrunched in confusion as she peered over her shoulder at the four boys who all quickly turned away with

blushing faces.

“There’s no way that’s Mad Max,” Mike commented, ripping his sandwich into little pieces.

“Yeah,” Dustin agreed, still eyeing the redhead across the cafeteria where she sat with Richie’s friends. “Girls don’t play video games!”

“Dustin,” Mike rolled his eyes shaking his head at his friend. “*What I mean* is you can’t get seven hundred and fifty thousand points on *Dig Dug.* It’s impossible!”

“But her name is Max,” Lucas reminded.

“So what?”

“So, how many Maxes do you know?” Lucas laughed.

“I dunno,” Mike shrugged, watching Max as he popped a piece of sandwich in his mouth.

“Zero, that’s how many,” Lucas continued. “This is Hawkins. There aren’t really any other Maxes around. And it just so happens that two days after Mad Max takes the high score in Dig Dug there’s a new girl named Max and the two aren’t related whatsoever? I don’t think so.”

“Exactly,” Dustin nodded, flip-flopping his opinion. “She’s gotta be Mad Max.”

“I saw her in the parking lot earlier,” Will added. “She skateboards.”

“She's so awesome,” Dustin breathed, eyes not moving from Max.

“Awesome?” Mike scoffed, staring at his friend in disgust. “You haven’t even spoken a word to her!”

“I don’t have to. I mean, look at her,” Dustin pressed, and all four boys turned to stare at her just as she turned to look over her shoulder at them. “Shit!”

All four boys turned to look intently at their lunches, faces bright red.

“Do you think she saw?” Will asked, voice high with embarrassment.

“Hey, stalkers.”

All four boys turned to look up at Max who was now stood next to their table, arms crossed over her chest as she looked down at the four red-faced boys.

“U-uh, hey,” Lucas squeaked, smiling nervously up at the girl.

“Why are you four creeps staring at me?”

“We, uh, we weren’t!” Dustin stuttered.

“Sure,” Max scoffed, squinting down at them. “Just quit it, okay?”

Lucas and Dustin nodded fervently while Mike stared at her blankly and Will looked down at his food.

“Hey,” Max’s eyebrows quirked, noticing Mike for the first time. “Are you-”

“Yup,” Mike cut her off, already knowing she was going to ask if him and Richie were twins.

“You don’t even know what I was going to ask.”

“Yes, I do,” Mike continued, a bored expression on his face as he turned back to his torn-up sandwich. “You were going to be the millionth person to ask if Richie and I are twins and I was going to give you my one millionth sarcastic no.”

“O-kay,” Max laughed nervously, not expecting the reaction, before turning on her heal and heading back to the Losers’ Club’s table.

“Your brother’s an asshole,” Max told Richie as she sat down.

“Don’t I know it,” Richie laughed as Eddie scowled.

“Leave him alone,” Eddie defended, glaring at Max slightly. “He’s had a hard fucking year-”

“Eds, baby, chill,” Richie murmured, rubbing the back of Eddie’s neck.

“No, Richie,” Eddie continued. “Someone needs to defend your brother and if *you* won’t *I* will.”

“Bug, please,” Richie whispered in Eddie’s ear, kissing his cheek. “Don’t be mean.”

Eddie deflated slightly, looking down at his lap embarrassedly. Richie sighed, wrapping an arm around Eddie and pulling him in to rest his head on Richie’s shoulder as he let Eddie pull his free hand into Eddie’s lap to nervously play with Richie’s long fingers.

“Mike wasn’t always a dick,” Richie explained, peering over at his brother then at Max. “Some shit went down last year. He’s just had a hard time bouncing back from it all.”

Richie pressed a kiss to Eddie’s hair when he heard his boyfriend let out a little sniffle.

“I’m sorry,” Max whispered embarrassedly. “What happened?”

The other five Losers stiffened, shooting Richie a look telling him not to snap at the new girl. They all knew too well how Richie sometimes reacted to people asking questions about Mike’s behaviour.

“It’s not my story to share, sorry,” Richie smiled sadly, effectively ending the conversation.

The rest of lunch was filled with a vaguely tense atmosphere which the Losers tried to cover up with jokes and stories. Eddie remained relatively silent, picking at his lunch but not really eating anything, instead remaining curled against Richie’s chest.

Towards the end of lunch Eddie watched as Will stood up to exit the cafeteria with Principal Coleman. Will had an appointment at the lab today. He had been nervous about it all week and Eddie had tried to reassure him he would be okay. Will absolutely hated his biweekly

appointments at Hawkins' Lab.

Eddie tensed slightly as he watched Will leave, resting his chin on Richie's shoulder as he peered over it and waved at Will. Will gave him a tiny smile and waved back before exiting the cafeteria.

"You good, baby?" Richie murmured, looking down at Eddie. Eddie nodded, still watching the door Will had exited through.

"M'fine," Eddie responded, settling down under Richie's arm again.

"Eds, you've barely eaten anything," Richie commented, pointing at Eddie's nearly untouched food.

"Not really hungry," Eddie whispered.

"C'mon," Richie nudged him, picking up a grape from his lunch and rubbing it on Eddie's lower lip. "Just a bit. For me?"

Eddie's lips curled into an embarrassed grin as his cheeks flushed before opening his mouth enough for Richie to pop the grape into his mouth. Eddie then turned, hiding his face in Richie's chest in embarrassment at letting Richie feed him as he chewed, causing Richie to chuckle and press a kiss to Eddie's head.

"What are you two idiots doing?"

"Richie!"

"Nothing!"

Richie crossed his arms over his chest, staring down at Lucas and Dustin who were hunched behind a row of machines watching Max play Dig Dug at the arcade after school.

"We just wanted to see if she was really Mad Max," Dustin admitted.

"Of course, she is!" Richie laughed, shaking his head at the other two.

"Well, yeah but she's a *girl*," Dustin continued.

“So?”

“Well, girls don’t play video games, Richie.”

Richie raised his eyebrows before looking pointedly at Max then back at his brother’s best friends.

“Well, sure looks to me like that girl right over there is playing a video game,” Richie spoke to the boys in a patronizing tone. “And kicking your asses at it, if I do say so myself.”

Dustin groaned as Lucas laughed.

“Ugh, I’m exhausted,” Richie moaned, flopping down on his bed.

“You work at an arcade, Richie,” Mike laughed, looking up from his comic. “Not exactly manual labour.”

“Fuck off, I just worked a whole four fucking hours after six hours of school,” Richie grumbled. “I’m a goddamn saint!”

“Sure,” Mike snorted.

“So, what’d I miss at dinner?” Richie asked, grinning.

“The usual,” Mike sighed. “I’m a fuck up and mom’s annoyed with me… Oh and by the way, dad still likes using vaguely cliché phrases to look like he’s actually involved in the conversation, in case you were wondering.”

“Good ol’ Ted,” Richie joked. “Well, see ya later!”

Richie vaulted himself off of the top bunk and made his way towards the window.

“What? You just got home,” Mike looked at his brother with a surprised face.

“Gonna go get Eddie from Will’s and spend the night at his place,”

Richie explains as he climbs out the window. “Why, you gonna miss me? I can stay home and spoon you if you’d like Mikey-”

“Fuck off, Richie,” Mike groaned making Richie laugh and salute him before sliding their bedroom window shut behind him.

“How’s Will?” Richie asks as they walk down the dark road towards Eddie’s house.

“He’s okay,” Eddie shrugged. “You know how he is after appointments… Quiet… Almost sad, I guess?”

Richie hummed his agreement.

“Jon’s great though,” Eddie adds quickly. “He’s so sweet with Will.”

“Don't tell me I need to compete with Will’s brother, as well as Max’s now,” Richie groaned jokingly causing Eddie to laugh and punch Richie’s shoulder softly.

2. Trick or Treat, Freak

"Well isn't my Buddy Holly just the just the prettiest little butterfly," Richie cooed, leaning down to peck the top of his little sister's head as he came skidding into the kitchen, making the girl squeal with delight. Holly was dressed in her blue butterfly costume for the toddler Halloween playdate Karen and a few of the local mothers had planned. "Are you excited to go trick-or-treating with Richie and Eds tonight, Holly Doll?"

"You're taking Holly trick-or-treating?"

"Yeah, you have a problem with that Michael?" Richie asked, raising an eyebrow at his brother, surprised at the judgement in Mike's voice. The most random things set him off lately.

"Boys, enough," Karen interrupted, sweeping Holly up into her arms. "Holly and I have to get to Nora's. Richie, you and Eddie need to be here to take Holly out at six o'clock before it gets too dark."

"Aye, aye," Richie garbled through a slice of toast, saluting his mother.

Karen scurried out the front door leaving the three Wheeler siblings sitting around the kitchen table alone.

"So, you comin' to the party tonight, Mikey?"

"No," Mike scoffed, shoving a waffle in his mouth.

"Why not, Mike?" Nancy asked with surprise. "Like, the whole school is going."

"Doesn't mean I have to," Mike deadpanned. "The guys and I are going to hang out and watch movies tonight."

"Laaaaaame," Richie cried, pushing himself up from the table.

"Hey, guys," Richie greeted loudly as he approached Mike's truck with Eddie, where Max and the other Losers were hanging out before

school started.

“Hu-hu-hey Richie, hey E-ed!”

“Hi Bill,” Eddie smiled, eyes flickering to Max quickly before looking away.

“You guys are coming to help set up tonight, right?” Stan asked from where he was stood next to Bill, furiously scribbling in a notebook. The Losers, more specifically Stan and Bill, were planning the Halloween party for tonight and most of the school was coming. Stan had been in planning-mode for weeks.

“Oh, we’re taking Holly out tonight, so we won’t be there until at least nine,” Eddie told Stan apologetically.

“Eddie,” Stan scowled. “I need you. These losers can’t organize themselves out of a cardboard box.”

“Sorry, Staniel,” Richie apologized. “Buddy Holly’s been jazzed about trick-or-treating with Spaghetti and I for weeks.”

“Whatever,” Stan mumbled, turning back to checking the inventory of alcohol that he had taken last night.

“Who’s Holly?” Max asked, looking around confused.

“My baby sister,” Richie grinned. “Eds and I take her out every year.”

“That sounds like fun,” Max smiled back.

“Yeah, it’s a tradition,” Eddie piped up, a fake smile plastered on his face as he wrapped his arms around Richie’s middle. “*Just* us three. No guests allowed!”

Richie gave Eddie a funny look, laughing and mumbling about his Spaghetti Head, clueless as ever as Eddie’s cheeks turned pink at his outburst.

“Are you comin’ to Bill’s party, Max?” Richie asked.

“Oh, um, well I wasn’t really invited-”

“Everyone’s invited Maxie!” Richie interrupted, making Eddie look up at Richie quickly. *Maxie?* When had that become a thing? “Right, Big Bill?”

“Y-y-yeah! Wh-whole school’s welcome!”

“Oh, okay,” Max smiled. “Yeah, I’ll come!”

“Sweet!” Richie exclaimed. “This is gonna be awesome! Big Bill’s parties are legendary!”

Eddie scowled at the ground as everyone broke off into various conversations, listening as Max asked Mike’s opinion on some new bearings she was considering for her skateboard, assuming Mike would know since he lived on a farm. Eddie smiled as he listened to Mike’s opinion.

‘Wrong, Mikey,’ Eddie thought as he listened.

“But that’s just my guess, I don’t really know. Eddie’s the mechanics genius,” Mike laughed, nodding towards Eddie.

“Really?” Max asked, turning to Eddie and placing a hand on his arm. “Could you-"

Eddie ripped his arm away from Max like she’d burned him, staring at his arm with wide eyes as he whimpered and gasped for breath.

“Oh, sorry,” Max mumbled embarrassedly. “Did I hurt you?”

“Shit, S’ghetti, baby” Richie turned to Eddie, watching as the small boy’s chest heaved with effort as he tried to suck in air. “It’s okay, c’mon, you gotta breathe,” Richie rambled, wrapping an arm around Eddie and rifling through his boyfriend’s backpack for his antiseptic wipes. “C’mon, breathe for me, bug.”

“What’s going on, is he okay? Did I hurt him?” Richie heard Max hiss to the other Losers as Richie backed Eddie up to lean against Mike’s truck, trying to block his boyfriend from view.

“C’mon, baby,” Richie cooed, pulling out a wipe and swiping it up and down Eddie’s forearm, where Max had touched him. “You’re

okay, c'mon you gotta breathe, you're okay. I got ya."

"Eddie, I'm sorry, are you okay?" Max asked, trying to peer around Richie.

Eddie immediately dissolved into a fit of tears, hiccupping and gasping for air as he hid his face in Richie's chest.

"Bev," Richie moaned, looking back at Beverly helplessly.

"C'mon guys," Beverly called, gesturing for all of her friends to follow her into the school.

Richie wrapped his arms around Eddie's shoulders, holding his sobbing boyfriend against his chest and pressing kisses to the crown of his head as he listened to his friends retreat, Max questioning them the entire way. Richie trusted Beverly to explain the situation to Max.

"R-r-rich," Eddie whimpered.

"It's okay, baby," Richie whispered into Eddie's hair, murmuring repeated reassurances to the boy. "I've got you, you're okay. You're safe, I've got you. I'm here."

The losers' lunch table was tense that afternoon. Everyone was trying to distract from Eddie's episode earlier in the day, but Max was clearly distressed. Richie and Eddie were also extremely quiet, Richie only by extension of his boyfriend.

Eddie was typically quite quiet and shy after a particularly bad panic attack out of embarrassment at his behaviour. As a result, he resorted to only speaking in hushed whispers to Richie, who acted as a buffer between the boy and the rest of the world. It was a bad habit that Richie had indulged since they were young children. Beverly was always reminding Richie that he couldn't baby Eddie like that if he wanted to really help him and Richie agreed, but he was never able to follow through on his words when Eddie started speaking in soft whispers, eyes trained downwards.

"Hey, Eddie," Max interrupted Stan mid-sentence, looking at Eddie as

he pulled away from Richie to take a bite of his sandwich. “I’m really sorry about this morning. I didn’t know.”

Eddie’s cheeks flushed crimson, his head jutting in a stiff nod through his embarrassment. Richie smiled sadly, kissing Eddie’s cheek before the smaller boy could hide his face against Richie’s arm again.

“Hey, Max,” Dustin called nervously as he approached Max, who was putting her skateboard in her locker, with Lucas. “I’m Dustin and this is-”

“I know who you are,” Max laughed.

“You do?”

“We met yesterday… Remember stalkers?”

“Oh, we didn’t think you’d remember us,” Dustin grinned.

“We, uh, we weren’t stalking you though,” Lucas added. Max raised her eyebrows in amusement, listening to the two boys ramble nervously.

“No, we were just concerned because, you know, you’re new and all.”

“Yeah, yeah, and concerned for your safety!”

“My safety?” Max laughed, crossing her arms over her chest.

“There are a lot of bullies here,” Dustin explained.

“So many bullies, it’s crazy,” Lucas agreed, nodding his head.

“I think I’ll be alright, thanks for your concern though,” Max laughed, slamming her locker shut.

“Okay, well, we were talking last night, and you’re new here-”

“As you’ve said,” Max interrupted, holding back a smile.

“So, you probably don’t really have any friends to spend Halloween with,” Dustin rambled. “And we’ve established that you’re scared of bullies… so we were thinking that it would be okay if you hang out with us."

“It would be okay?” Max asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Yeah,” Dustin exclaimed. “Our party’s a democracy and the majority voted you could come to our movie night!”

“I didn’t realize it was such an *honor* to hang out with you guys,” Max responded sarcastically.

“Well, I mean,” Dustin smiled, missing the sarcasm as Lucas grimaced, having not missed it. “We’re pretty great a picking out movies, we’re gonna watch Ghostbusters. We figured you’d wanna come.”

“That’s presumptuous of you,” Max responded, smiling slightly. “I actually already have plans though.”

“Plans?” Dustin asked confusedly.

“Bill Denborough’s party,” Max nodded.

“You’re going to Bill Denborough’s party?” Dustin asked in surprise.

“Yeah, is there a reason I shouldn’t be?”

“Well, no, but-”

“That’s cool, Max,” Lucas interrupted, silencing his friend. “Have fun at Bill’s! Maybe we’ll stop by.”

“Cool,” Max nodded, smiling at the boys before turning on her heel and heading towards Ben who she spotted at the end of the hall.

“But, if you change your mind,” Dustin called down the hallway after Max. “We’re meeting at the Wheeler’s house at nine!”

“You’re an idiot,” Lucas groaned, turning to walk in the opposite direction of Max, leaving a confused Dustin standing in the middle of

the hallway.

“Richie,” Bev spoke, nibbling on the end of a fry. The two had skipped last period and gone to Benny’s Burgers for an afternoon snack. It was one of the only periods Richie didn’t share with Eddie, and therefore one of the only ones he was ever able to skip.

“Hmm?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“You just did,” Richie shot her a goofy smile.

“Shut up,” Bev smiled. “Seriously though, can I ask you something? And promise you won’t get upset.”

Richie scrunched his eyebrows in confusion.

“I mean… I guess?”

“You know how you kinda invited Max to the party tonight?”

“Yeah…”

“Well,” Bev swallowed the fry in her mouth, looking up from the straw she was swirling in their shared drink. “You know Eddie doesn’t like her, right?”

“What?” Richie asked, face full of confusion.

“Eddie, ya know, your boyfriend-”

“Love and light of my life, my soulmate, my one true love, yeah,” Richie joked, urging her on. “I know of him."

“Well, haven’t you noticed that Max being around kinda upsets him?”

“Does it?” Richie asked in a small and disbelieving voice.

“You really didn’t notice?”

“Bev, I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“You haven’t noticed how Eddie glares and pouts and clings to you whenever she’s around?” Bev asked, placing a hand on Richie’s wrist kindly.

“I guess, but I just thought it was Eds being Eds…” Richie murmured, studying the table as he thought.

“Well, I mean, it *is* Eddie being Eddie,” Bev laughed, squeezing Richie’s arm slightly. “Remember when you and Stan first became friends?”

“Yeah,” Richie whispered, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“He convinced him you had a deadly disease that Stan would catch if he hung out with you,” Bev recalled anyway, making Richie full on grin into their milkshake. “He’s one territorial little shit when it comes to you.”

“He’s *my* territorial little shit.”

“I know,” Bev smiled. “That’s my point though, I think he’s jealous that you like Max so much.”

“But I like her in a different way,” Richie whined, pouting up at Bev. “It’s not even close to the same.”

“I know, babe,” Bev repeated, squeezing Richie’s arm again. “You know Eddie though, better than even *I* know Eddie. He’s insecure about the craziest things, one of them being you.”

“Insecure about what, though,” Richie continued, face scrunched in confusion again. “It’s not like I have romantic feelings for her. I just think she’s cool and funny. She fits in with the Losers really well.”

“Don’t be a idiot, Richard,” Bev laughed. “You know he worries about you being bisexual.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never even thought about being with someone other than Eddie in my whole life! It’s just Eddie, it’s always been just Eddie. *Always.*”

“And while that’s incredibly sweet, you know he still worries that he’s not good enough,” Bev reminded Richie.

“He’s such a dumb ass,” Richie groaned. “He’s the funniest, coolest, prettiest, hottest, sexiest person in the whole world. No one can make me laugh like he can… and you can’t even imagine how good he is with his mouth, Bev, seriously-”

“Please don’t talk about my baby boy like that,” Bev grimaced, making Richie laugh.

“Well, actually he’s *my* baby boy,” Richie quipped, popping a fry into his mouth. “Seriously though, he’s my favourite fucking person ever. How do I convince him I don’t like Max more than him?”

“I dunno, Richie,” Bev laughed, making Richie pout. “Just… maybe hold off on inviting her to join in on every little thing. Spend some time with just Eddie.”

“If I could control it, it would literally always be just me and Eddie,” Richie responded seriously.

“Wow, thanks asshole,” Bev joked, throwing a fry at his face. “And maybe just show him some extra attention when Max is around. And cool it with talking about how awesome she is all the time.”

“Guess I can do that,” Richie sighed.

“Also, I’m not gonna sit here and pretend I know or understand what happened to you guys last year, because I don’t understand. And that’s okay, I’ve accepted that you guys don’t want to talk about it, but whatever happened… it hurt Eddie. Everyone covers for your brother and defends him because of whatever happened last year… but no one defends Eddie-”

“Hey, that’s not true, I-”

“Richie, stop. I know you are there for him, but over the last year Mike has taken up so much of your attention and no one’s been there for Eddie in the same way. I know he’s strong and independent and can take care of himself, but he doesn’t *have* to be all those things when he has you.”

Richie stared down at the table, almost ashamed to admit to himself what Beverly was saying was true. Sure, the two boys were attached at the hip but Richie, and even Eddie, had spent the whole year making sure Mike was okay and Mike was comfortable. He hadn't really spared a thought to how Eddie was feeling because Eddie had mostly gone back to normal within a couple weeks of Eleven's disappearance.

"Have you noticed that his mysophobia's been getting worse?" Bev asked quietly.

"Bev, he doesn't like to talk to you guys about it. I shouldn't-"

"His skin is rubbed raw from the hand washing and the wipes and the detergents. Then his episode this morning when Max barely- "

"Bev," Richie choked out, blinking rapidly. "Please… *please*, stop."

"I don't think he sleeps very well anymore, but you would know for sure though," Bev powered on, needing to get her point across. "He's lost weight, he's studies *obsessively*, Richie-"

"*Bev,*" Richie choked again, a couple of tears hitting the table before he furiously wiped at his cheeks.

Beverly wasn't telling him anything he wasn't already aware of. Instead she was pointing out exactly what Richie had been trying to ignore.

"He needs you right now, Richie. You're his boyfriend *and* his best friend and I think he needs some real attention and comfort and you're the only person he'll let actually provide that. You know that."

"You're right," Richie whispered. "I'm such a shit boyfriend, fuck!"

"Richie, no!" Bev sighed. "That's not what I'm trying to say! You're *the* best boyfriend Eddie could ask for, believe me! You two are just so wrapped up in each other all the time that I think it's hard for you to see the bigger picture of what's going on with him. You see him as this perfect fucking human and ignore all of his faults."

"I'm gonna do better," Richie muttered, looking up at Beverly with a

hard stare. “Promise.”

“I know you will, hun,” Beverly smiled, leaning across the table to kiss Richie’s cheek.

Richie and Beverly returned to school just as the final bell rang and decided to hang out by Mike’s truck in the parking lot as they waited for their friends to get out of class.

“How’d you guys get out here so fast?” Eddie called, eyeing the two suspiciously as he approached them with Stan and Bill.

“Ran,” Richie quipped, holding his arms out for Eddie and grabbing onto his hips once the smaller boy was close enough to be reached. “Mm, Eddie Spaghetti, my favourite!” Richie groaned, pulling Eddie flush against him and making snorting sounds against Eddie’s neck, causing the smaller boy to squeal with laughter.

“Richie, stop! Stop! Rich!” Eddie giggled breathlessly, palms resting on Richie’s chest.

“You’re so delicious though,” Richie smiled, pulling away from the smaller boy’s neck and pressing a kiss to his boyfriend’s nose. “I missed you, c’mere,” Richie murmured, pressing his lips against Eddie’s.

“Rich,” Eddie mumbled against Richie’s lips, causing the taller boy to hum. “Why do you taste like fries and chocolate shake?”

“What?” Richie asked, pulling back and trying to act innocent.

“Richie, did you skip history again?”

“No.”

“Bev?”

“I’m sorry, Eddie!” Beverly whined, face apologetic.

“Bev!” Richie exclaimed, a look of betrayal crossing his features.

“Richie,” Eddie shrieked, smacking his boyfriend repeatedly in the chest. “I told you to quit ditching!”

“Baby, I’m *sorry*,” Richie whined, trying to pull Eddie to his chest but the smaller boy was squirming in his grip, glaring up at his boyfriend.

“What’s going on?” Max asked as she approached the truck with Mike Halon and Ben, arriving last as their algebra class was on the other side of the school.

“My idiot boyfriend is gonna flunk outta high school because he keeps skipping class to gorge himself on French fries and milkshakes,” Eddie hissed, still glaring up at Richie.

“I’m not gonna flunk out, Eds,” Richie laughed. “It’s just history! If this is about the milkshakes, I’ll take you to Benny’s right now and buy you all the milkshakes you can drink-”

“It’s not about the milkshakes, Richard,” Eddie interrupted. “It’s about me not wanting you to skip class. I want you to do well in school, Rich!”

“Okay, you’re right,” Richie murmured, ducking to look into Eddie’s eyes. “I’m sorry, I’ll stop ditching class. Okay? I’m sorry, I love you.”

“Love you too,” Eddie mumbled, giving in to Richie’s pout and fitting himself against Richie’s chest, making the taller boy grin goofily over his boyfriend’s head at the rest of his friends.

The group of teenagers jumped at the sound of a horn blaring across the parking lot from them.

“Shit,” Max grumbled. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Max trudged towards the blue Camaro, waving over her shoulder as the Losers shouted their goodbyes to her.

“You’re late,” Billy spat as Max slid into the passenger’s seat.

“School *just* got out,” Max sighed, rolling her eyes.

“Jesus, I don’t care,” Billy continued, as though he hadn’t really heard what Max said. “You’re late again and you’re skating home, got it?”

“Whatever,” Max grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest and shrugging down against her seat as Billy tore out of the parking lot recklessly.

“Ugh,” Eddie groaned, as they pushed through the throng of teenagers crowding the front lawn of the Denboroughs’ house.

“C’mon, Spaghetti,” Richie grinned over his shoulder, leading Eddie through the crowd. “It’ll be fun.”

“We shoulda stayed at your place,” Eddie continued, shaking his head and scowling at a sophomore who had nearly sloshed his beer on Eddie’s shoes. “Everyone’s already trashed.”

“That just means we gotta catch up,” Richie laughed, wiggling his eyebrows at Eddie making the smaller boy laugh despite himself.

They had finally pushed their way through to the kitchen to grab drinks, Richie downing a couple of glasses of the punch Beverly had made while Eddie retrieved the canned beers Bill had hidden for Eddie since he refused to drink from a communal punch bowl or beer keg.

“This punch is really good, babe,” Richie informed him, watching as Eddie grimaced and pinched his nose as he chugged back his beers. “You sure you don’t want some?”

“Absolutely not, Rich,” Eddie shook his head, slamming down an empty can and letting out a small burp from the carbonation making Richie laugh.

“I don’t see the difference though,” Richie continued, trying to tempt Eddie with the admittedly strong punch. “Even if you don’t drink it,

the germs'll be in *my* mouth-"

"Unless you're trying to convince me not to kiss you tonight, I suggest you shut it, Rich," Eddie warned, cracking his second beer.

"Eddie!"

Eddie and Richie turned to find Stanley, pushing his way through the crowd towards the couple.

"Stan the man!" Richie cheered, raising his arms in celebration.

"Hey, Richie," Stan waved, focusing on Eddie. "I need your help."

"What's going on?"

"Come on, you'll see," Stan grumbled, grabbing Eddie's sleeve and pulling him through the crowd as the smaller boy yelped and grabbed his remaining beers.

"No, that's cool," Richie spoke to himself sarcastically. "I'll just stay here and drink punch. No really, I don't mind-"

"Thought I told you to quit talking to yourself, Wheeler."

"Bev!"

"Hey, asshole," Beverly laughed, wrapping her free hand around Richie. "Been looking for you everywhere. Where's Eddie?"

"Just ditched me to go make out with Stan," Richie snorted, drinking the rest of the punch in his cup.

"What?!" Max cried, squeezing through the crowd behind Beverly.

"Hey, Max," Richie laughed.

Eddie stumbled down the stairs from Bill's room, bouncing between bodies and the Denbrough's walls, splashing beer on people as he

passed.

“Chee,” Eddie giggled, pushing up off of the wall he had just crashed into, holding his head dizzily.

“Eddie?”

“Benny!” Eddie cried, throwing his arms around Ben’s shoulders and spilling the rest of his beer down Ben’s back.

“Hey, bud,” Ben mumbled, patting Eddie’s back and grimacing at the wet feeling of his shirt. “What are you doing on your own, Eddie? Where’s Richie?”

“Was helpin’ Stanny,” Eddie explained, falling back onto a nearby wall, dropping his empty beer can to the floor as he started slipping sideways down the wall.

“Woah, there,” Ben laughed, wrapping an arm around Eddie’s waist for support, the smaller boy giggling into Ben’s shoulder. “C’mon, let's go find your boyfriend.”

“Chee!” Eddie cheered.

“Yup, we’re gonna go find Richie.”

“Yay,” Eddie mumbled, leaning his head back on Ben’s shoulder and smiling as the two stumbled through the party.

“Richie,” Ben groaned, grabbing Richie’s shoulder as they approached him from behind.

“Haystack!” Richie grinned, putting down his cup and turning towards his friend. “Have you seen- There you are, Eds!”

“Chee,” Eddie smiled, jumping up and wrapping his arms around Richie’s neck, making Riche stumble into the kitchen counter behind him.

“Hi baby,” Richie laughed, kissing Eddie’s cheek.

“Miss’d ya,” Eddie slurred, pulling back from Richie’s neck and smiling goofily at Richie.

“You’re so cute,” Richie smiled, pressing a soft kiss to Eddie’s nose.

“Mm, I know,” Eddie mumbled, snuggling back into Richie’s neck.

“How much did he have to drink, Haystack?”

“No idea,” Ben shrugged. “Found him stumbling around the living room.”

“Wuzn’t,” Eddie protested, whipping around to glare at Ben and stumbling back into Richie dizzily.

“Eddie, baby,” Beverly cooed, making her and Max’s presence known to Eddie. “You’re drunk.”

“M’not, Bevy,” Eddie whined, pouting at Beverly.

“I think you are, baby,” Richie laughed, wrapping his arms around Eddie from behind and pulling him against his chest.

“Awe, leave him alone,” Max laughed, defending Eddie lightheartedly.

“No one ask’d you,” Eddie slurred angrily, turning to glare at the redhead.

“Eddie,” Beverly scolded lightly, eyes flicking anxiously to Richie.

“No, it’s okay,” Max swallowed, face flushed. “Um, I think I’m gonna head out.”

“No, Max, you don’t have to leave,” Beverly rushed.

“I told Lucas and Dustin I would stop by the Wheeler’s,” Max continued, waving Beverly off. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“Okay, bye, Max,” Beverly sighed.

“See ya,” Richie murmured, feeling embarrassed and upset as Eddie stared pointedly in the other direction, refusing to acknowledge Max further.

Max and Ben left the three in the kitchen, Ben wanting to get to bed at a reasonable time since he had a test in the morning, heading towards the front door.

“What the fuck, Eddie!” Beverly shrieked, smacking Eddie’s shoulder.

“Ow,” Eddie whined. “What?”

“Why would you say that to Max,” Beverly continued, glaring at the smaller boy.

“Dunno wha ya talkin’ ‘bout,” Eddie slurred, turning towards Richie and snuggling into his boyfriend’s chest.

“I’m gonna go find Bill,” Beverly sighed, rolling her eyes and disappearing into the crowd.

The two remained in the kitchen, tense silence swallowing them despite the thumping music in the room.

“Eds-”

“M’gon be sick,” Eddie mumbled, pitching his body away from Richie and towards the nearest bathroom, hand pressed to his mouth.

“Move, move,” Richie commanded, pushing people out of the way and guiding Eddie past the bathroom line and into the bathroom while teenagers swore at them. “Yeah, yeah, fuck you too,” Richie called, slamming the door in an angry sophomore’s face.

Richie sighed, turning towards Eddie who was now whimpering as he stared down at the toilet in horror, no doubt imagining the germs swarming across the cool porcelain, hand still pressed to his mouth as he choked and gagged on the vomit pushing up his throat.

“Baby,” Richie breathed, rushing towards Eddie with flailing arms as he tried to help his boyfriend. “Fuck,” Richie swore, eyes whipping around the room in a frenzy. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Blurgh!”

“Eds,” Richie cried, turning towards Eddie who was immediately gagging and crying as he stared down at the floor that he had just puked all over.

“Rich,” Eddie whimpered.

“Shh, shh, shh,” Richie cooed, pulling Eddie away from the puddle of sick and lifting him up onto the counter. “It’s okay, it’s okay, don’t cry,” he whispered, wiping Eddie’s tears as he grabbed a clean face cloth and bottle of mouthwash from the bathroom cupboard.

“Chee,” Eddie hiccupped, curling his hands in the front of Richie’s shirt as said boy wet the face cloth and began wiping Eddie’s face clean. “M’sorry,” Eddie whimpered, shivering slightly.

“It’s okay, baby, it’s okay,” Richie soothed, pressing a kiss to Eddie’s forehead as he tossed the cloth into the sink. “Open,” Richie murmured, pressing a cup of mouthwash to Eddie’s lips.

Eddie whined, as he sloshed the astringent liquid around his mouth before spitting it out with a groan.

“Good job, lovebug,” Richie cooed, shrugging off his jacket and wrapping it around Eddie’s shaking shoulders.

“Y’know I hate tha,” Eddie slurred, pressing his face into Richie’s shoulder as he wrapped his arms around his boyfriend.

“You’re such a cute little lovebug, though,” Richie teased, ignoring the pounding on the bathroom door.

“M’sorry,” Eddie whispered as Richie pressed his lips to the crown of Eddie’s head.

“You already said that, Spaghetti,” Richie laughed.

“Mean ‘bout Max,” Eddie explained, pulling away from Richie slightly.

“Eds-”

“No, ‘m bein’ an asshole,” Eddie interrupted, pulling back from Richie and leaning back against the mirror. “M’sorry.”

“It’s okay, baby,” Richie murmured, grabbing another towel from the cupboard and throwing it over the puddle of puke.

“’s not okay,” Eddie pressed, hiccupping. “Being a fuckin’ dick an’ I dun know why.”

“Baby,” Richie sighed, turning back to Eddie and wrapping the smaller boy in his arms again.

“I dun wanna be mean,” Eddie whimpered, hiccupping violently against Richie’s neck.

“Baby, calm down,” Richie whispered, rubbing his hand up and down Eddie’s back soothingly. “Or you’re gonna be sick again, calm down.”

“M’sorry,” Eddie cried again.

“Shh, stop apologizing,” Riche spoke into Eddie’s hair, sliding his hands under Eddie’s legs and gripping his thighs before wrapping Eddie’s legs around his waist. “C’mon, let’s get you home.”

“Wanna go t’ yer bed,” Eddie mumbled, face in Richie’s neck.

“Course,” Richie laughed, leaning Eddie against the wall as he unlocked the bathroom door and pushed their way out into the hallway.

“Ew, it smells like shit in here,” Richie heard someone yell behind him, making him chuckle.

Richie tumbled through the front door nearly thirty minutes later, causing the five teenagers in the living room to scream.

“Chill,” Richie laughed, stumbling into the living room as he struggled slightly under Eddie’s deadweight. The smaller boy had

begun snoring lightly against Richie's neck on the walk home. "It's just me."

"You're an asshole," Mike groaned from his spot on the couch between Dustin and Will. Max and Lucas were sharing the other couch, leaning towards one another ever so slightly.

"Is he okay?" Max asked, sitting up straighter in her spot on the couch.

"He's fine," Richie responded, hiking Eddie further up his torso where he had begun slipping, eyes flickering meaningfully towards Lucas and back to Max knowingly, making the girl blush.

"Chee?" Eddie mumbled tiredly, pulling back from Richie's chest.

"Oh, I see," Richie drawled. "He wakes up *after* the walk home, what a *cute* coincidence."

"Rich," Eddie whined, hiding his face in Richie's chest when he noticed the other five teenagers staring at them. "M'tired."

"Okay, okay," Richie laughed, squeezing Eddie's thighs teasingly. "Night guys," Richie called over his shoulder before heading up the stairs with Eddie as the five teenagers bid them farewell.

3. The Pollywog

Summary for the Chapter:

SORRY THIS TOOK SO LONG!

I'm not super happy with it, but I really struggled with this chapter and just wanted to get it out there.

Didn't describe the scene with Mike and Max in the gym when Eleven is watching them, but assume it happened in the same way for this fic, thanks!

Also, WARNING: the first 'scene' is kinda explicit, but also not super necessary for the plot so feel free to skip over it if it makes you feel uncomfortable.

As Richie brushed his fingers through Eddie's slightly greasy curls the smaller boy began to stir, snuffling against Richie's chest.

"Morning, baby," Richie whispered, smiling down at Eddie's face.

"No," Eddie whined, eyes scrunching against the light pouring in through the window as he turned to burrow his face into Richie's side, making the taller boy laugh.

"How're ya feelin'?" Richie asked, voice raspy with sleep.

"I wanna die," Eddie croaked. "Need water."

"I'll be right back," Richie laughed again, pushing himself up onto all fours above Eddie and kissing his forehead before climbing down off the bunkbed while Eddie whined at the loss of Richie's body heat.

Richie returned minutes later, carefully climbing the bunkbed's ladder before shuffling up towards Eddie with a glass of water and a couple of Advil tablets.

“Here, Eds,” Richie smiled, straddling Eddie’s lap as the smaller boy sat up to greedily drink the cool liquid.

“Thanks, Chee,” Eddie sighed as he slumped against Richie’s chest tiredly.

“Anytime, baby boy,” Richie grinned, playing with the curls at the nape of Eddie’s neck.

“Rich,” Eddie grumbled, making his boyfriend laugh. Eddie absolutely hated being called 'baby boy', but Eddie using a grumpy little babyish voice while denying being a baby was Richie’s absolute favourite thing.

“What?” Richie laughed, pushing Eddie back against the pillows before shimmying down his boyfriend’s legs to settle between them. “You *are* my baby boy,” he murmured as he pushed up the hem of Eddie’s shirt, placing feather light kisses along the waistband of Eddie’s boxers.

“Rich,” Eddie breathed, hands squeezing Richie’s shoulders.

“My pretty… little… baby… boy,” Richie continued between kisses, making Eddie gulp. “*Mine*… All *mine*.”

“Rich, stop,” Eddie mumbled, cheeks flushing as his fingers fluttered on Richie’s shoulders, making said boy grin. “Mike-”

“He’s in the basement with Will,” Richie smirked, eyes twinkling with mischief. Eddie huffed, remembering that the other boy had also slept over. Dustin and Lucas had left to walk Max home before going to their own respective houses the night before.

“We still shouldn’t,” Eddie swallowed, pushing himself up and trying to squeeze past Richie to descend the ladder. “We have school and- Richie!”

“We have time,” Richie mumbled against Eddie’s neck, pulling the smaller boy’s back flush against his chest as he settled back against his pillows.

“Rich, we really shouldn’t,” Eddie mumbled weakly, squirming

against his boyfriend as Richie pushed a hand past the elasticated waistband of Eddie's boxer shorts.

"Hmm," Richie hummed playfully, pinching and tugging at Eddie's foreskin. "You sure?" Richie teased, voice full of mirth as Eddie groaned and slumped back against Richie's chest pliantly, legs widening.

"Rich," Eddie sighed, chest rising and falling with huffs of laboured breathing. Richie grinned wickedly, knowing exactly how to turn the smaller boy into a puddle of whines, '*I love you*'s, and breathy whimpers of *'uh, uh, uh'*.

Richie rolled the sensitive, wrinkled bit of skin between his thumb and forefinger as he slipped his free hand down the back of Eddie's boxers.

"Up," Richie mumbled, nipping at Eddie's shoulders while patting one of Eddie's butt cheeks, signalling for Eddie to lift his hips. Eddie did so eagerly, letting Richie push his boxers down his legs before kicking them off of his ankles and into the twisted sheets of Richie's bed. "Someone's eager," Richie joked, continuing to tug lightly at the skin covering Eddie's sensitive head.

"Shut up," Eddie sighed, sliding down Richie's chest slightly as he hooked his ankles over Richie's, their knees knocking together as Eddie grabbed at Richie's thighs.

"Mm," Richie hummed, kissing Eddie's cheek quickly before pulling Eddie's foreskin back to reveal the swollen red tip of Eddie's stiffening cock. "Well, hey there little buddy," Richie cooed.

"Rich," Eddie giggled, twisting to hide his blushing face against Richie's chest. "I *hate* when you talk to my dick."

"It's rude not to say hello when your friend comes out to play, Eds," Richie joked making Eddie roar with giggles again.

"I hate you," Eddie choked out.

"You don't," Richie laughed, kissing Eddie's shoulder as he dragged a loose fist up and down Eddie's length making the smaller boy gasp.

“I don’t,” Eddie agreed, squeezing one of Richie’s thighs tightly while his shoulders tensed against Richie’s chest.

“Good?” Richie murmured against the soft skin of Eddie’s shoulder.

“Mhm,” Eddie hummed, chewing at his lower lip as he hips squirmed excitedly, struggling to decide between rutting against Richie’s fist or pushing back into Richie’s equally hard crotch behind him.

“Rich,” Eddie sighed, head falling back against Richie’s shoulder as the taller boy cupped his balls in his freehand, rolling them between his fingers.

“You like that baby?” Richie asked, smiling at Eddie’s face which was now turned up towards the ceiling.

“Yeah,” Eddie choked out, swallowing the excess saliva collecting in his mouth. “More,” Eddie whined, hips pulling back from Richie’s grip as he squeezed at the base of Eddie’s cock.

“Huh?”

“Like…” Eddie tutted in frustration, grabbing Richie’s hand which was no longer fisted around him, and lifting it to settle at the head of his cock.

“Oh,” Richie laughed, closing his hand over the head of Eddie’s dick as though he was holding the gearshift in his mom’s station waggon. “Like this?” Richie asked, grinding his palm into Eddie’s swollen head, ripping a needy, shameless whine from the smaller boy’s throat.

“Chee,” Eddie gasped, hips stuttering from side to side as though trying to escape Richie’s touch while Richie’s hands following the movement defiantly. “M’gonna cum,” Eddie whined.

“Then cum, baby boy,” Richie whispered into Eddie’s ear, listening as Eddie began letting out little chanting gasps of ‘*uh, uh, uh*’ in time with Richie’s fist. Typically, Richie would work Eddie up to his peak before frustratingly stopping his ministrations and leaving a needy Eddie begging until Richie gave in and worked him back up to his peak. He loved teasing his easily frustrated boyfriend, but they didn’t

have the time that morning. “Let me see you cum, love.”

“Chee,” Eddie groaned, eyes squeezed shut and face scrunched at the force of his orgasm, abdominal muscles clenching.

“So pretty,” Richie murmured, finger tips scratching lightly at Eddie’s lower abdomen as he continued to stroke Eddie, working the viscous liquid dribbling down his hand into the skin of Eddie’s length while Eddie melted against Richie’s chest.

“Too much,” Eddie whined once he had his breathing back under control, tugging at Richie’s wrist weakly.

Eddie twisted around to straddle Richie once the taller boy released him, pushing them both down the mattress so they were laying down once again.

“I love you,” Eddie whispered, kissing Richie softly and smiling as his boyfriend mumbled a *‘Love you, too’* into his mouth.

Richie whined as Eddie pulled away, shimmying down Richie’s body and trailing kisses in a straight line down his stomach, tugging at the waistband of Richie’s own boxers.

“Baby, come back,” Richie whined and made grabby hands in Eddie’s direction, making Eddie smile.

“Hmm?” Eddie hummed, eyeing Richie innocently as he began dragging tiny little kitten licks along the head of Richie’s cock with the tip of his tongue.

“Eds,” Richie sighed, head falling back into the pillows as Eddie placed soft kisses up and down Richie’s length. Richie could already feel himself teetering on the edge at Eddie’s overly affectionate demeanour. “So good, you’re so good baby,” Richie whined as Eddie wrapped his lips around Richie’s head, suckling on it softly, making Richie groan and grapple at Eddie’s arms, which were holding him up.

“Honestly, all I wanna do right now is fuckin’ kiss you. This isn’t fair, why can’t I kiss you *while* you suck my dick. What the fuck God, why didn’t you make it so I could,” Richie rambled as Eddie sucked

greedily at Richie's dick, sinking down the length. He had grown accustomed to Richie's rambling during sex. "And another thing, why the- *oh, fuck,*" Richie groaned, gripping Eddie's curls tightly as the smaller boy sunk down his entire length, nuzzling his nose against Richie's pubic hair and humming in triumph at shutting Richie up. Richie squirmed as Eddie's nose rubbed his lower abdomen, trying to push down his ticklishness for the time being.

"Eds, *fuck*," Richie grunted at the feeling of Eddie's throat squeezing him and the puffs of air against his skin as Eddie struggled to breathe through his nose. "I'm gonna- fuck, Eds, you gotta get off" Richie groaned, tugging at the back of Eddie's head to get him to release Richie before he came.

"Eds, c'mon Eds, *oh fuck!*" Richie grunted as he came down Eddie's throat unexpectedly, watching with blown pupils as Eddie gagged against him.

Richie's head fell back into his pillow as Eddie released his cock with a pop, kissing Richie's inner thigh before wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand and snuggling against Richie's chest, coughing at the rough feeling in his throat

"You just fuckin' swallowed," Richie whispered, staring up at the ceiling. "What the fuck? You never swallow."

Eddie shrugged his shoulder against Richie's chest in reply, continuing to try and clear his swollen throat.

"Well, good fuckin' morning to me, I guess," Richie laughed, wrapping an arm around Eddie, making the smaller boy grin into his chest.

Eddie squeezed into the chair between Richie and Will at the kitchen table, smiling as Richie kissed his cheek and Karen served him eggs and toast.

"Good morning, sweetie," Karen greeted. "Thank you for making the

bed, you're such a good boy."

Eddie's cheeked flushed with confusion then realization, understanding that Karen must have peeked into the guest room where Eddie was supposed to have slept the previous night and noticed the bed was made up. She was the only one at the table, apart from Ted and Holly, who wasn't aware that the bed was only made because Eddie had never actually slept in it.

"Oh, uh," Eddie stuttered nervously, cheeks darkening as he watched Richie frantically shovel food into his mouth out of the corner of his eye. "No problem, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Honestly," she continued, turning to feed Holly. "I don't know where I went wrong with these two. I apologize in advance for how useless Richie'll be around the house for you."

Eddie laughed, panic easing at Karen's words as his chest instead filled with warmth at the confidence Karen had that the two boys would still be together in the future.

"Hey," Richie whined, bits of scrambled egg squishing from the corners of his pout. "I'm not useless! In fact, just this morning I showed Eddie just how helpful- Ow! Never mind, I'm useless…"

Eddie shook his head, removing the heel he had just rammed into the top of Richie's foot to shut him up.

"Where's Nancy?" Eddie asked, nibbling on a piece of toast as he made faces at a giggling Holly.

"That girl," Karen tutted, only just realizing that Nancy wasn't at the table. "Still in bed! I've been calling her all morning. *Nancy!"*

Richie snorted as Karen pushed back from the table, storming up the stairs as she called for her oldest daughter.

"Nice one, Eds," Richie joked, winking at Eddie.

"Oops," Eddie muttered, vaguely remembering a very drunk Nancy from Bill's party, realizing she was likely hung over.

“So, how was your night?” Will asked Eddie with a knowing smile as the four boys walked to school, remembering Eddie’s passed out form as he was carried into the Wheelers’ house by his boyfriend the previous night.

“Ugh,” Eddie groaned. “I barely remember it to be honest. The last thing I *really* remember is something about Stan asking my advice about some girl...”

Will chuckled good naturedly as the twins argued a few yards ahead of them.

“How was your night?” Eddie asked.

“Fine,” Will shrugged, grabbing the straps of his backpack and staring down at his feet as he silently recalled sharing the details of his episodes with Mike.

“Will?”

“Eddie,” Will sighed. “I need to tell you something.”

“What’s going on Will?” Eddie asked, voice wavering worriedly.

“Last night, after the guys and Max left…” Will licked his lips nervously. “Mike and I were talking.”

“Okay…”

“And I was telling him about some stuff,” Will said vaguely.

“What kind of stuff?”

“It's not important,” Will waved off, not wanting to tell Eddie about his visions of the Upside Down. “But…”

“You can say it, Will,” Eddie told him, grabbing the sleeve of Will’s shirt and giving him a reassuring look.

Will sighed. *Of course,* Eddie knew what Will had to say before he

could even say it. Eddie was scarily perceptive sometimes.

“I think I like Mike,” Will whispered, cheeks bright pink as he avoided eye contact with the other boy.

Eddie tugged on Will’s sleeve, stopping them in the middle of the road before throwing his arms around Will’s shoulders.

“I’m so proud of you. I love you, Will,” Eddie whispered, squeezing his shaking friend. “No matter what, I love you. We all love you. It’s okay.”

“But, I don’t want to lose, Mike,” Will argued.

“You’re not gonna lose him, Will,” Eddie replied, pulling back to give Will a serious look. “You know Mike’s not like that.”

“I know,” Will muttered. “But having a gay brother is different than having a gay best friend who’s in love with you!”

“Hey, calm down,” Eddie sighed, pulling Will into another hug. “It’ll be okay. Don’t worry, it’s going to be okay.”

“Oi, Byers,” Richie shouted in a thick Scottish accent, making both boys jump in surprise. “You stealin’ my boyfriend?”

“Pfft, *stealing*?” Eddie laughed, recovering quicker than Will and linking elbows with him before running to catch up with the twins. “I’d choose him over you any day, Wheeler.”

“Hey,” Richie pouted, giving his boyfriend his best dejected look. Eddie shrugged and pulled Will along, skipping towards Hawkins’ High.

The four boys parted ways in the parking lot, Richie and Eddie heading towards Mike Hanlon’s truck where the Losers and Max were gathered while Mike and Will walked off towards the school.

“Hey, guys,” Eddie grinned as they approached the truck. “Whatcha

talkin' about?"

"The party," Mike answered. "Apparently someone yacked all over Bill's bathroom!"

Richie bit down on his bottom lip to keep from laughing.

"Ew, that's fucking disgusting," Eddie blanched, nose scrunching in disgust. "This school is full of a bunch of fuckin' animals!"

"H-h-heard a r-r-rumor it was you, E-Ed," Bill answered, lips twitching with amusement.

"Me?" Eddie asked, eyebrows raised. "I would never… Oh God!" Eddie groaned, face paling as he noticed Richie trying to hold back his laughter. "No, no, no! Richie!" Eddie whined, covering his face with his hands and walking towards his boyfriend to hide his face in embarrassment.

"Oh, so *now* I'm your boyfriend," Richie teased, snorting with laughter. "Earlier it was all *Will this* and *Will that* and '*Will and I are running away together, Richie,'* but now that Mr. Perfect-Will-Byers is gone and all you've got is reliable ol' Dick Wheeler-"

"Rich, please shut up," Eddie moaned, words muffled against Richie's chest. "I'm *so* sorry, Bill," Eddie continued to speak into Richie's chest making the whole group laugh and causing Richie to wrap his arms around Eddie's back.

"Okay, okay," Richie called, still laughing. "Let's leave the precious spaghetti-boy be."

Eddie squirmed in Richie's arms, pressing against Richie further in an attempt to show his appreciation.

"Hey, Max," a new voice called, approaching the group.

Eddie turned his face to peek out from behind his hands. It was Lucas approaching the redheaded girl who was currently laughing at something Mike had said.

"Oh, hey Lucas," Max smiled. "What's up?"

“Not much,” Lucas answered, cheeks burning with nervousness as he fidgeted with his watch. “Was wonderin’ if you wanna walk to class… with me…”

“Yeah, sure,” Max answered, smile widening as she pushed up off the side of Mike’s truck. “I’ll see you guys later.”

The Losers minus Eddie all called out goodbyes before turning back to snicker about Lucas’ obvious crush on the Californian.

“The case of Phineas Gage is one of the great medical curiosities of all time,” Mr. Clarke lectured, the lights dim and an overhead slide depicted a skull was being projected on the board at the front. “Phineas was a railroad worker in 1848 who had a nightmarish accident.”

Eddie sighed, slumping down in his seat further with his arms crossed over his chest as he rocked his head back and forth on his neck which was aching with an on-coming headache. Eddie jumped slightly when he felt Richie’s warm fingertips press at the back of his neck, rubbing at it and twisting his curls between his fingers, making Eddie lean his head back to shoot Richie an upside-down smile. The taller boy was leaning flat against his desk, long arms stretched in front of him to reach Eddie.

“A large iron rod was driven completely through his head,” Mr. Clarke continued, regaining Eddie’s curious attention as he drew a line vertically through the skull on the projector. “Phineas miraculously survived. He seemed fine. And physically, yes, he was. But his injury resulted in a complete change to his personality. So much so that friends that knew him started referring to him as ‘No longer Gage’.”

Eddie sucked his bottom lip into his mouth, chewing on it as he peered over at Will a few rows ahead of him. The story felt oddly similar and it made Eddie worry. Was Will alright?

Stop, Eddie chastised himself. He had promised Richie he would stop

trying to diagnose everyone around him in an attempt to ease his own anxieties.

“At the time, this was known as the American Crowbar Case-”

Eddie jumped in his seat with a gasp as Dustin came tumbling through the door, clutching his backpack and oddly enough, his old plastic Garfield lunchbox from elementary school.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Clarke,” Dustin huffed as he stumbled towards his desk. “Really, I’m so sorry. Please continue with the class. Don’t mind me. Continue, please!”

Eddie rolled his eyes, shuffling in his seat to get back into a comfortable position to continue listening to Mr. Clarke’s lesson. When he noticed the absence of Richie’s fingers in his hair he turned around to pout at his boyfriend who chuckled and grabbed at Eddie’s hair once again, making him smile contentedly.

“Although it wasn’t a crowbar,” Mr. Clarke continued as Dustin turned towards Mike, Lucas, and Will, whispering hurriedly and drawing Eddie’s attention.

Eddie looked back at Richie, nodding over his shoulder towards the four boys with a questioning look. Richie shrugged in reply, frowning at his brother and his friends.

“AV Club. Lunch,” Dustin hissed, turning in his seat and leaning forward to make eye contact with the couple sitting towards the back of the room.

“Ugh, I hate it in here,” Eddie shivered as he followed Richie into the AV Room, remembering the last time he had been here with Eleven.

“Same,” Mike nodded sadly, picking at the chapped skin of his bottom lip.

“Okay, okay,” Dustin interrupted, shuffling into the room with the old lunch box. “Enough moping, I have something to show you

guys!"

"And *we're* supposed to care because…" Richie asked, referring to himself and Eddie.

"Oh," Dustin blushed. "I just… I thought…"

"Dustin, just get on with it!" Lucas cried, wanting to go and eat lunch before next period.

"Right, okay," Dustin nodded, placing the lunch box in the centre of the table in the AV Room as the rest of the group crowded around. "Get ready to be amazed with the single greatest scientific discovery of our generation," Dustin announced dramatically, moving to pop open the clasps on the lunchbox while most of the group rolled their eyes at him. "His name is d'Artagnan!"

The lunchbox lid popped open, revealing a chittering, slimy green reptile.

"Ugh," Eddie groaned, backing away from the table and stepping slightly behind Richie as the rest of the group leaned closer over the table top to look into the yellow plastic container holding the slimy animal.

"Cute, right?" Dustin grinned, looking over at Max proudly.

"You're kidding, right?" Eddie sputtered, holding Richie's shoulder as he leaned away from Dustin's general direction.

"D'Artagnan?"

"Dart for short," Dustin laughed, leaning over to scoop the creature into his hands. "I found him foraging for food in the trash last night."

Richie's lip quirked at Eddie's audible retch at the idea of Dustin picking through a trashcan.

"You wanna hold him?" Dustin asked, leaning towards Max who stood opposite him on the other side of the table.

“No!” Max gasped, head shaking. “No, no, ugh!” she groaned as Dustin dumped the animal into her instinctively cupped hands. Max quickly passed Dart off to Lucas, cringing at the slime left on her hands.

“Oh, God! He’s like a living booger!” Lucas observed, tossing it across the table to Will.

“Disgusting!” Will moaned, handing Dart off to the grinning Richie.

“Well, hey there,” Richie grinned, lifting his cupped palms towards his face to look the little creature in the eyes. “You’re so gross and slimy, d’you know that? Eds, wanna-"

“Richard,” Eddie shrilled, eyes full of warning as Richie turned towards him. “I swear to God! Get that disease-ridden thing away from me!”

“Mikey?”

Mike reached out his hands for Richie to deposit Dart into before turning towards Eddie and wiggling his slimy fingers at the smaller boy who shrieked and ran to guard himself behind Will.

“What is he?” Mike interrupted, inspecting the green reptile curiously.

“Well,” Dustin sighed, pulling a stack of library books from his bag resting on the floor. “At first, I thought he was some type of pollywog.”

“What the fuck’s a pollywog?” Richie snorted from his spot near Will and Eddie, now jokingly jabbing his slimy hands around Will towards a squealing Eddie.

“It’s another word for a tadpole,” Dustin explained to Richie exasperatedly. “And a tadpole is a larval stage of a toad-”

“Fuck off, I know what a tadpole is, dickwad,” Richie barked, falling back to sit on an empty table next to Max.

“Alright, genius,” Dustin drawled. “Then you know most tadpoles are

aquatic. Well, Dart, he isn't. He doesn't need water."

"Yeah, but aren't there some tadpoles that don't need water?" Eddie asked, still staring disgustedly at his boyfriend's hands.

"Terrestrial pollywogs, yeah," Dustin nodded. "Two to be exact. *Indirana semipalmata* and the *Adenomera andreae*. One's from India and one's from South America."

"That's one long trip for such a little guy," Richie whistled. "Maybe Eds knows. He's a little guy too!"

Eddie rolled his eyes, flipping Richie off lazily.

"Maybe some scientists brought it here and it escaped?" Max offered.

"Woah," Mike interrupted, completely ignoring Max's comment. "Do you guys see that? Looks like something's moving inside it!"

The whole group leaned forward to peer into the lunchbox Dart had been returned to.

"Here," Richie sighed, grabbing the desk lamp to shine it on the creature in the dark room, jumping as it screeched up at him. Richie gulped, trying to place why the sound was so terrifying, yet so familiar.

"Richie!" Dustin sneered, pushing the light away. "Dart hates the light! That's another weird thing though. Reptiles are cold-blooded. Ectothermic, right? They love the sun and heat, but not Dart! He hates it, it hurts him."

"So, if he's not a pollywog or a reptile…"

"Then I've discovered a new species," Dustin grins, looking up from Dart to the six teenagers around the room.

"We gotta show Mr. Clarke!" Lucas says immediately, a determined look on his face.

"No, what if he steals my discovery?"

“Why would we tell Clarke?” Richie asks, giving Lucas a confused look.

“He’s not gonna steal your discovery,” he answers Dustin first, rolling his eyes. “And *because* he’ll know what to do!”

“I’m thinking of calling it *Dustonius* pollywogus,” Dustin announces, ignoring Lucas’ suggestion.

“That’s a shit name!” Richie snorts, launching into an argument with Dustin while the rest of the group shake their heads at the two, packing up their belongings as the bell signalling the end of lunch rang.

“Y’know,” Dustin calls out as the group starts leaving the room, Dustin shoving Dart in the closed lunchbox into his backpack. “When I become rich and famous for this one day don’t come crawling back to me all ‘Oh, my God, Dustin, I’m so sorry for being mean to you back in high school-‘”

“That’ll never happen!”

“It will too!”

“Richie, Eddie!” Max exclaimed, jumping to her feet from where she had been sitting on the floor, leaning against the door to the AV Room.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Richie asked, eyebrows scrunched in confusion. “Mike just said to meet here after last period. He was screeching like a lunatic though. Even rivalled Eddie Spaghetti!”

“Shut up, Richie!” Eddie scowled at him before directing his disapproving face toward Max. “What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know, they won’t let me in!” Max groaned, turning to bang on the door for the fifth time. “We were gonna show Dart to Mr. Clarke and then Mike came in yelling at us and now I’m here and they won’t. Let. Me. In.” Max emphasized her point slamming his

palm against the wooden door between words.

“Hey,” Richie shouted, moving to bang on the locked door. “Dipshits, let us in!”

There was a pause before the door opened, Mike pulling Richie and Eddie into the room before slamming the door closed on Max.

“Hey!” Max shouted, banging on the door.

“Okay, something’s going on,’ Mike started, making Richie roll his eyes.

“We figured…”

“Will saw something that looked like Dart last year after… everything…” Lucas explained making the couple turn towards the shorter boy with wide eyes.

“You did?” Eddie squeaked.

“Kinda,” Will nodded, staring intently at the table in front of him. “But there was no tail.”

“But then he heard it last night during our movie,” Mike continued, causing Will to blush as Eddie narrowed his eyes in scrutiny, knowing that this was what Will had been sharing with Mike the night before. “The exact same sound.”

“Why didn’t you tell us before?” Dustin sighed.

“I wasn’t sure,” Will whispered, chewing on his bottom lip nervously.

“So, it’s a coincidence-”

“Or not,” Richie shook his head, thinking about earlier in the day when the creature had shrieked at him.

“What if when Will was stuck in the Upside Down he somehow acquired True Sight?”

“What?” Eddie asked, face scrunching in disbelief.

“It gives you the power to see into the ethereal plane,” Dustin explained pensively.

“Where the fuck did that idea come from?”

“Well, maybe Will’s visions aren’t really flashbacks at all,” Mike continued as Will’s cheeks flamed. Eddie could feel his own face flushing with anger at the fact that Will was keeping his episodes to himself. “Maybe they’re real. Maybe Will can somehow see into the Upside Down.”

“But then,” Richie started, piecing Mike’s thoughts together in his own brain. “That would mean…”

“Dart is from the Upside Down,” Mike nodded at his twin.

“We gotta take him to Hopper,” Eddie announced firmly as Richie nodded next to him.

“I agree,” Mike nodded as well.

“No, no way!” Dustin protested. “If we take him to Hopper, he’ll kill him!”

“Dustin! He’s from the Upside Down,” Mike shouted. “He *should* be killed!”

“How can you say that?”

“How could you not?! He’s from *the Upside Down*!”

“*Maybe*,” Dustin reminded. “But even if he is, that doesn’t automatically mean he’s evil.”

“Yes, it does!” Eddie snorted.

“That’s like saying just ‘cause someone’s from the Death Star doesn’t make them bad!”

“We have a bond,” Dustin replied airily.

“A bond?!” Eddie snorted again, unable to believe Dustin’s carelessness. “Dustin he’s a disgusting-”

“No, he trusts me!”

“He trusts you?”

“Yes-” Dustin continued, voice desperate while the lunchbox in the centre of the table begins to shake, Dart chittering and groaning inside the plastic.

“Holy fuck,” Richie muttered, the six boys’ eyes glued to the lunchbox as Max shouted pleas from outside the room.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” Eddie shrieked as Dustin leaned forward to pop the latches on the lunchbox, the small creature tumbling out.

“Holy shit!”

“Oh, my God!”

The creature rolled onto its legs, groaning as it’s stomach undulated painfully before two hind legs burst through its skin.

“What the fuck!” Richie shouted, stumbling back into a wall, squishing a gagging Eddie between his back and the wall slightly.

“Kill it!” Lucas cried, throwing machinery at the scuttling creature as Mike struggled against Dustin to smash the creature with a radio microphone.

“No, no, no-Dart!” Dustin cried as Max burst into the room, a flattened paperclip in hand, providing an escape for Dart.

“What the-?”

“Shit!”

“Fuck, follow it!” Mike cried, scrambling towards the hallway.

“What the hell, Max?!” Eddie shouted cruelly, pushing past her. “You

let him escape!”

“What, I-” Max tried to response, face scrunched with confusion.

“Don’t hurt him,” Dustin cried as all six boys tumbled into the hallway, running in different directions.

“This is so stupid,” Eddie huffed, stalking along the hallway with Richie. “We don’t even know what’s going on without a fuckin’ radio!”

“I know- Will?” Richie stopped, noticing the smaller boy sprinting out the door to the running track.

“What?”

“I think I just saw Will go outside,” Richie pointed towards the end of the hallway.

“Guys!” Lucas shouted, jogging up behind them. “Will said he found Dart in the bathroom, come on!”

“Really?” Richie asked, unsure and looking over his shoulder towards the door he could swear he had seen Will exit through, but running after Lucas and Eddie anyway.

“Where’s Dart?” Mike huffed, chest heaving from running to the opposite side of the school from the gym.

“I don’t know,” Dustin shrugged, leaning back against the wall in the abandoned boys' room as Richie, Eddie, Mike, Lucas, and Max stared expectantly.

“What?!” Mike questioned. “Will said he was in here! Wait, where’s Will?”

“I don’t know, he wasn’t here when I got here,” Dustin explained, patting at his hat awkwardly.

“Wait, Rich you said you saw him running outside, right?” Eddie

asked, turning to look up at his boyfriend.

4. Will the Wise

Summary for the Chapter:

I'm sorry in advance...

The six teenagers sprinted through the deserted hallways, shouting Will's name.

"Eddie!"

"Mrs. Byers?" Eddie skidded to a halt huffing to catch his breath, staring at the woman approaching from a cross-sectional hallway.

"What's going on?" the woman asked, face full of worry. "I was supposed to pick Will up out front."

"We think he's this way," Eddie waved over his shoulder, leading Mrs. Byers towards the door Richie had seen Will exit through earlier in the day.

"Will!" Mrs. Byers screamed as they stepped out into the cool November air. Will was stood on the field in the centre of the running track. "Will!"

"Oh, my God!" Eddie wailed as he took in his shaking friend.

Mike reached the boy first, the others sprinting along behind him.

"Will? Will!" Mike shouted, shaking his best friend's shoulders. "I think he's having another episode," Mike explained over his shoulder as they others reached them.

"Will! Will, wake up!" Mrs. Byers began wailing, placing her own hands on Will's shoulders as Mike warily stepped aside. "Will, it's mom. It's me! Wake up, please!"

The other six teenagers stood in a circle around the two, watching the scene unfold.

"Will," Richie heard Eddie whimper, eyes filled with tears. Richie

grabbed one of Eddie's shaking hands, squeezing it tightly.

"Will! Wake up!" Mrs. Byers continued, watching as Will's eyelids began to flutter before he opened his eyes with a gasp. "Will!"

"Mom?"

"Oh, Will!" Mrs. Byers cried, pulling her son to her chest as her eyes brimmed with tears. "Let's get you home."

"Will," Eddie called softly as Mrs. Byers led her son through the high school, his friends following cautiously.

"I'm okay, Eddie," Will nodded over his shoulder, giving his friend a soft smile.

"Okay," Eddie nodded back as they made it to the front of the school.

"I'll talk to you guys later," Will explained, staring at his feet before making his way towards his mom's old green car.

"I'm worried about him," Eddie sighed, chewing on his bottom lip as he watched the two Byers' get into their car.

"Me too," Mike agreed. "Two episodes in two days… It's getting worse."

"Do you really think he acquired True Sight?" Lucas asked, watching as Mrs. Byers' car left the parking lot.

"What's True Sight?" Max asked, face scrunched in confusion.

"Lucas!" Eddie tutted as Mike punched him in the shoulder.

"It's nothing," Lucas muttered making Max frown.

"It's clearly not nothing," Max argued.

"Would you drop it, Max?" Eddie groaned, glaring at the redhead.

"Yeah," Mike nodded, back Eddie up. "No one even asked you to be

here!"

"Mike," Richie hissed, face full of disapproval.

"Hey, I'm friends with Will too," Max argued.

"*No*, you're not," Eddie spat, face turning red.

"Eds-"

"I am, so!"

"No, you aren't, you've just inserted yourself into the group," Eddie interrupted, swallowing as his eyes burned. He refused to cry out of anger in front of Max. "Could you just get lost? No one wants you here!"

Max's face was equally red and her eyes were brimming with tears. Her jaw clenched as she nodded stiffly before making her way down the front steps and taking off on her skateboard, wiping at her face angrily.

"What the *fuck*, Eddie?!" Richie exploded, arms stretched out to his sides in disbelief with wide, angry eyes.

"What?" Eddie spat, looking up at his boyfriend angrily as a couple tears slid down his cheeks. He couldn't tell if he was upset with himself for yelling at a near stranger or the fact that Richie was seriously and truly angry with him for the first time in forever.

The other three boys shuffled nervously, watching the couple glare at one another. The two didn't fight often, they hadn't seen them shout at each other like this since middle school, just before they had started dating.

"Why the *fuck* would you say that to her?"

"Because it's true," Eddie swallowed, wiping at his cheeks as he held angry eye contact with Richie.

"*No*, it's not!" Richie shouted. "She's my friend, Eddie!"

Eddie sucked his bottom lip into his mouth before biting down on it harshly, more tears springing to his eyes as he turned away from Richie.

“I get that you’re insecure and you think that I like her better or whatever the fuck…” Richie continued angrily as Eddie began to cry, lips puckered tightly as he sat down on the steps facing away from the other four boys. “But it’s not true and you need to get over it! She’s my friend and that’s it and just because you’re my boyfriend it doesn’t mean you have complete dominion over me and have the right to shout cruel things at her. Get over yourself, Eddie!”

“Fuck you, Richie!” Eddie exploded, standing and stalking up the steps angrily. “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!” he shouted, until he was standing toe to toe with Richie and breathing heavily.

“Is that all you can come up with?”

“Fuck you, you’re a fucking asshole, Richard Wheeler,” Eddie hissed, voice low enough that the other three had to strain to hear his words as he jabbed his index finger into Richie’s sternum angrily. “I lost El and now I’m losing Will, who’s spiralling out of control but *no*, fuck Eddie’s feelings. Max Mayfield just rolled into town with her skateboard and Californian accent. We all need to drop whatever the fuck we’re doing and make sure *Max* is okay!”

“I’m not asking you to be her best friend, Eddie,” Richie responded with just as much venom. “I’m just asking you to not be a fucking bully! It’s not so hard, but I guess you’ve got an excuse, right? When you’ve grown up with an abusive bully for a mother and a dead father you can't help but-” Richie stopped himself watching as Eddie’s face crumpled. Richie knew all the right buttons to press to really and truly hurt Eddie and had gotten so riled up that he’d been unable to think clearly enough to stop himself.

Eddie’s eyes darted to the other three boys, face burning with embarrassment and shame with what Richie had just said with the other boys listening.

Eddie turned from Richie, covering his mouth with a shaking hand as he descended the stairs, taking in gasping breaths.

“Fuck!” Richie swore, reaching out to grab Eddie’s shoulder. “Baby, I’m sorry-”

“*Don’t* fucking touch me,” Eddie hissed, whipping around to glare at Richie before continuing his retreat. “Leave me alone, Richie. I’m not kidding.”

“Fuck,” Richie repeated, dropping down to sit on the step Eddie had vacated and pulling at his hair.

“What the fuck was that?” Dustin asked, the other two boys still watching Richie with shock.

“Me being a fucking *dumbass*,” Richie muttered darkly, hanging his head with shame.

“Richie, get the hell outta bed,” Mike groaned, hands on his hips as he stared up at the lump of blankets his brother was hidden under.

“No,” Richie croaked, staring tiredly at the wall. He hadn’t slept all night.

“Come on, Richie!” Mike sighed. “We’re gonna be late!”

“I’m not going to school.”

“Yes, you are!”

“Fuck off, Mike,” Richie sighed, pulling his comforter over his head. “I’m not going.”

Minutes later Karen was storming into the room, shouting at Richie to get out of bed.

“Richard Theodore,” Karen shrilled. “I swear to God, get out of bed this instant-”

“Please don’t make me go mom,” Richie moaned, head peaking out from under the duvet to pout at his mother.

“Richie,” Karen sighed, approaching the bunkbed and gesturing for him to come down and join her on Mike’s bed.

Richie descended the ladder, blankets wrapped around his shoulders as he sat next to his mother on Mike’s bunk, resting his head on her shoulder as she wrapped an arm around him.

“What’s going on, sweetie?”

“I fucked up mom,” Richie choked, voice scratchy and eyes swollen and sleep deprived.

“Honey, what happened?” Karen asked, ignoring Richie’s foul language.

“Mom,” Richie cried, breaking down into wracking sobs. “He won’t talk to me. I tried calling and I even went over there and that *bitch* wouldn’t let me in to talk to him!”

“Who, Eddie?” Karen asked confusedly. Richie nodded sadly, shoulders shaking with his sobs. “What happened, Richie?”

“I said some…” Richie sighed, wiping at his face as he stared at his lap. “I said some mean shit to him, mom.”

“What?” Karen gawked, unable to believe that Richie could ever hurt Eddie in any way. “There’s no way.”

“I was angry,” Richie muttered, biting his bottom lip. “I was really angry that he was being mean to Max.”

“Max?”

“New girl… She’s my friend and for some reason that upsets Eddie and he’s just been so *mean* to her,” Richie tried to explain. “So, I was mad at him. I said stuff that I *knew* would really hurt him about his mom... and his…*fuck*, his dad-”

“Richie,” Karen sighed sadly.

"*I know*," Richie choked, squeezing his eyes shut and pushing tears out of them. "And I did it in front of Mike and his stupid friends… *God,* I'm so fuckin' stupid."

"Richie, don't say that," Karen scolded, rubbing Richie's shoulder comfortingly.

"I hurt him, mom," Richie choked, tears brimming in his eyes once again. "I hurt him with one of the meanest things I could have said to him and I did it in front of other people because I knew that would upset him even more…"

"Sweetheart, look at me," Karen spoke softly, taking Richie's cheek in her hand. Richie looked up at Karen reluctantly. "That boy is head over heels, stupidly in love with you. Has been since you two were in kindergarten."

"But what if I really fucked it up?"

"You didn't," Karen shook her head with a smile. "It might take some time, but I don't think there's anything you could ever do that he wouldn't forgive you for."

"Y'think so?"

"I know so," Karen nodded. "The fact that you two made it out of middle school without killing each other proves you can get past a silly fight over a girl."

"Thanks, mom," Richie whispered, moving to lean against her shoulder again.

"Anytime, love," Karen smiled, petting Richie's hair. "Anytime."

"Eddie Bear!" Sonia called up the stairs. "Time to get up!"

Eddie rolled over, hugging a pillow to his chest as the sleeves of one of Richie's sweaters hung over his hands, the collar hanging off one of his shoulders due to its size. He hadn't gotten any sleep the night

before, instead tossing and turning as he thought about what Richie had said to him while hating himself for wishing Richie's warm weight were pressed against his back.

"Eddie!" Sonia shrieked again.

"I'm up!" Eddie croaked back, sitting up and pulling his knees to his chest. He had no idea how he was supposed to face Richie at school.

"Eddie Bear, are you sick?" Sonia asked as Eddie sat himself in his usual seat at the kitchen table.

"M'fine," Eddie mumbled, grabbing a piece of toast and nibbling on the corner of it numbly.

"You look awful, sweetie," Sonia continued, hands fluttering around him nervously as she checked him temperature.

"Ma, I said I'm fine," Eddie sighed, pulling away from Sonia's clammy hands. "Just didn't sleep very well."

"Maybe we should go see Dr. Handor-"

"No mom," Eddie shook his head, pushing away from the table and moving to grab his backpack. "I'll see ya later."

"Eddie, you can't wear that to school!"

Eddie looked down at himself, eyes skimming his beat-up sneakers, faded old jeans and another one of Richie's sweatshirts.

"What?"

"You look a mess, Eddie Bear," Sonia moaned. "Just go put on a nice polo at least-"

"No," Eddie protested, pulling the sleeves of Richie's sweater over his hands. "Goodbye, mom," he repeated before heading out the front door to meet Bill, chin tucked down into the collar of the black

sweater.

“Wh-what happened to you?”

“Thanks for walking with me, Bill,” Eddie smiled sadly as they approached Hawkins High, heading straight for their homeroom class as they were too late to spend time at Mike’s truck before class started.

“A-A-Anytime, Ed,” Bill smiled. “Y-you gonna t-tell me why ya didn’t wa-walk with Richie?”

“I…” Eddie sighed, biting his bottom lip.

“Yuh-You don’t *have* to explain, Eddie,” Bill reassured him, placing a hand on Eddie’s shoulder comfortingly. Eddie nodded. “Alright. See y-you at lunch?” Eddie nodded at the boy again before reluctantly walking towards Mr. Clarke’s classroom. He hadn’t seen Richie since their fight the day before.

Eddie walked into the room to find Richie’s eyes staring hopefully at the door, clearly waiting for Eddie to walk in. Eddie whimpered, eyes flitting to the floor as he slowly shuffled towards his seat, fisting the extra fabric of Richie’s sweater in his hands self conciously. Richie looked as tired and upset as Eddie knew he himself looked.

“Eddie, hey, listen,” Richie jumped, leaning forward in his seat to talk to Eddie who had just sat down. Eddie’s heart sank further at the lack of a nickname. “I’m sorry for what I said yesterday.”

Eddie kept his back to Richie, digging through his bag for his biology notes as his held back tears. He was not going to cry in biology class over Richie.

“Baby, *please*,” Richie begged, fingers twitching with the need to reach out for Eddie but not wanting to risk possible rejection. Eddie felt his heart clench at Richie’s desperate sounding voice.

“Leave him alone, Richie.”

Eddie looked up at Mike in surprise, watching as the party, minus Will, glared at Richie from their seats.

“Stay out of it, Mike,” Richie hissed.

“No, Richie,” Mike challenged, glaring at his brother. “Eddie’s been my friend just as long as he’s been yours. I *said* leave him alone!”

“Boys,” Mr. Clarke called from the front of the classroom, eyebrows raised. “Do I have your permission to begin my lesson or would you like to share your discussion with the rest of the class?”

The twins held their glare before each turning away from each other reluctantly.

“Thank you,” Mr. Clarke nodded before flipping on the switch to the overhead projector. “Now, today we will be discussing the Fight-or-Flight Response…”

“Will didn’t want me to tell anyone, but on Halloween night he saw a sort of… shadow in the sky,” Mike explained.

“A shadow?” Richie asked from his spot atop one of the tables. Mike had called an emergency meeting with the four boys in the AV Room after school when Will didn’t show up for school that morning. “What kind of shadow?”

Eddie looked up at Richie, biting his lip as he watched his boyfriend with sad eyes. Richie looked questioningly around the room after asking his question, meeting Eddie’s quickly before the small boy scowled and returned his gaze to his lap.

Richie had spent the whole day chasing Eddie through the halls and begging him to accept his apology.

“I don’t know,” Mike responded, regaining Richie’s attention. “But it scared him… If Will really has True Sight, I mean, if he can *really* see into the Upside Down… maybe he saw that shadow again yesterday.”

“So that's why he was frozen like that?” Eddie murmured,

remembering his friend's frozen body.

"Maybe."

"Can it hurt him? I mean, if this shadow thing isn't from our world…" Eddie asked.

"I'm not sure," Mike responded, turning towards his curly haired friend. "Dustin?"

"Well," Dustin sighed, "If you're in another plane, you can't interact with the material plane, so theoretically, no, the shadow can't hurt him."

"Yeah, if that's even what's happening," Richie interrupted. "This isn't you're stupid game. This is real life!"

"So, what do we do?"

"We acquire more knowledge," Mike responded, nodding resolutely. "I'll go to Will's after school. See what's going on."

"I'll come with you," Eddie added, crossing his arms over his chest as Richie made an unhappy noise.

"Sure," Mike nodded. "You guys stay here and find Dart."

"Dart? What's he gotta do with this?"

"Are you kidding, Dustin?" Mike laughed without humour. "Will heard him in the Upside Down. I don't know how yet, but he's gotta be connected to all this. He's gotta be. If we find Dart, maybe we can solve this thing. Maybe we can help Will."

"Max!" Richie shouted, sprinting down the hall after the redhead with Lucas in tow. "Hey, Max!"

"Max, have you seen Dustin?" Lucas asks, slowing to a walk as they reach the scowling girl. "We're supposed to meet him after class."

Max glared silently at the two before turning to exit the school.

“Max,” Richie called, jogging again to keep up with her long strides. “Where you going? Come on, we gotta look for Dart!”

“Yeah, good luck with that, guys,” Max mutters.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with *me?!*” Max laughs without humor, rounding on the two boys. “What’s wrong with *you guys?!”*

“I don’t understand,” Lucas frowns while Richie stares at his feet in shame.

“You guys act like you want me to be your friend but then you treat me like shit!”

“That’s not true!” Lucas protests weakly.

“Yes, it is!” Max shouts. “You go and hide in the AV Club, keeping secrets like we’re in second grade or something… You know, I actually though you guys wanted me to be your friend.”

“We do!” Lucas nods. “But-”

“But *what?!”*

“Listen, Max,” Richie speaks up, frowning apologetically at the girl. “I’m sorry about Eddie and Mike… They’re being fuckin’ dicks to you right now but… just there’s things we can’t tell you, all right? For your own safety.”

“My safety?” Max laughs. “Because I’m a girl?”

“No!”

“Did you keep secrets from El?”

“How do you know about El?” Richie asks, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Did you?” Max presses, ignoring Richie's question.

“Max,” Richie sighs. “That was… different.”

“You know what,” Max laughs, hiking her bag higher up her shoulder and turning towards the parking lot where Billy is waiting for her. “It’s fine, I don’t wanna be your friend anyway!”

“Max!”

“Have a nice life!”

“Max, don’t be like this!”

“Why were you talking to them?” Billy sneers as soon as Max is close enough to hear him.

“I wasn’t,” Max mutters, pushing past Billy and heading for the passenger side door.

“It sure looked like you were,” Billy laughs.

“They’re just in some of my classes.”

“Why were you talking to them?”

“It was just about a stupid assignment, okay?” Max sighs, pulling on the handle of the locked door impatiently.

“Then why’re you so upset?”

“I’m not!”

“They causin’ you trouble?” Billy asks, eyebrows furrowed angrily.

“Why do you even care?”

“Because, Max,” Bill sighs. “You're a piece of shit, but we're family now whether we like it or not, meaning I'm stuck looking out for you.”

“What would I ever do without you,” Max sneers sarcastically.

“Hey!” Billy shouts, grabbing her wrist and squeezing it angrily. “This

is serious shit, okay? I'm older than you and something you learn as you get older is that there are certain types of people in this world that you stay away from, and those two, Max, those two are some of those people."

"Can we just go home?" Max whimpers, trying to pull her arm from her stepbrother's grasp.

"You stay away from them, you hear me?" Billy threatens, throwing her arm towards her chest. "Stay. Away."

"I'm sorry Richie's such a dick sometimes," Mike mumbled, kicking a pebble across the road as he walked towards the Byers' house with Eddie, hands buried in his pockets.

"S'okay," Eddie smiled half-heartedly, looking up at Mike. "S'not your fault."

"He shouldn't have said those things to you," Mike continued as Eddie's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "He's always been good at knowing exactly what to say to hurt someone as much as possible… He's acts like he's not, but he's actually really perceptive."

"I know," Eddie nodded, watching his feet kick up dirt from the road.

"He didn't mean it."

"I know," Eddie repeated, swallowing thickly. "Still hurt though…"

Mike nodded in understanding before falling silent again.

"Hey, Eddie?"

"Hmm?"

"Yesterday, when we were looking for Dart…" Mike trailed off.

"Mike?"

"I thought El was back," Mike whispered, face bright red.

“What?”

“I was with Max in the gym,” Mike explained. “And-and, she was riding her stupid skateboard and suddenly she just fell, like her board was pulled out from under her… Like a magnet… Like when El, y’know…”

“Oh,” Eddie choked, blinking in surprise.

“It’s stupid, I know,” Mike rushed embarrassedly.

“No, Mike,” Eddie shook his head, reaching out for Mike’s arm to stop him. “It’s not stupid. I understand.”

“You do?”

“I sometimes feel like she’s there too,” Eddie nodded.

“I miss her,” Mike mumbled, eyes watering embarrassingly.

“Me too,” Eddie nodded, holding back his own tears as he wrapped his arms around Mike who tensed in surprise before tentatively hugging Eddie back.

Eddie squeezed his eyes shut, hating himself as he tried to convince himself he was wrapped in Richie’s arms. His smell was slightly different and Mike’s overall presence was wrong, too tense and uncomfortable, but he still *felt* like Richie.

God, I’m such a fuckin’ creep, Eddie thought as he pulled away from Mike, wiping at a stray tear.

“Hello?”

“Will!”

“Will? Mrs. Byers?” the two shouted, banging on the front door to the Byers' house.

“Hi boys,” Joyce sighed, eyes wild as she opens the door to find the two teenagers on the other side.

“Is Will home?”

“Now is not a very good time, boys,” Joyce smiled apologetically, moving to close the door.

“Is he okay?” Eddie asked, eyes hopefully.

“Yeah, you know he’s just not feeling very well right now.”

“Can we-”

“He’s laying down, so I’ll tell him you both stopped by,” Karen moved to close the door again

“Wait, no!” Mike shouted, grabbing the door to stop it from slamming shut. “It’s about the shadow monster, isn’t it?”

“How-”

“Please, Mrs. Byers,” Mike begged. “Please let us see him!”

Joyce sighed, peering around her front yard suspiciously before hurriedly ushering the two boys into the house.

5. Dig Dug

Notes for the Chapter:

> its bad, I know but not gonna lie, I just finished writing this chapter and im completely blasted and as a result its not great and im sure theres a lot of grammar problems byt... its my birthday and I really wanted to write and post something today.
>
> oh well, I've made worse drunk decisions than posting a shitty chapter.

“What the fuck,” Eddie hissed under his breath as Joyce led the two boys to Will’s room, staring in wonder at the paper taped to surfaces across the Byers’ home as Joyce explained.

“Will, sweetie,” Joyce called as she knocked on the door to Will’s room. “Mike and Eddie are here to see you.”

“Hi guys,” Will whispered as he opened the door, face and neck glistening with sweat as his eyes watered with unshed tears.

“Will,” Eddie breathed, throwing himself at his friend and hugging him to his chest. “Oh, my God!”

Eddie clutched Will’s hand as they sat next to each other on Will’s bed, Mike carefully examining the drawings taped around Will’s room.

“It’s like,” Will swallowed, squeezing Eddie’s hand tighter. “It’s like I *feel* what the shadow monster’s feeling. See what he’s seeing.”

“Like in the Upside Down?”

“Some of him is there,” Will nodded, staring intently at his feet. “But some of him is here, too.”

“What do you mean, Will?” Eddie asked, eyeing his friend cautiously. “Here, like, in this house?”

“Yeah,” Will nodded, clearing his throat. “And… in *me*.”

Eddie looked up at Mike with wide eyes, panic clear on his face. Mike swallowed, abandoning the drawings and settling on Will’s other side.

“It’s like he’s reaching into Hawkins more and more,” Will continued, grey shirt darkening as it absorbed the beads of sweat rolling off of his skin. “And the more he spreads, the more connected to him I feel.”

“And the more you see these now-memories,” Mike guessed, Will nodding his agreement.

“At first, I just felt it at the back of my head,” Will choked, rubbing at the back of his neck with his freehand. “I didn’t even really know it was there. It’s like when you have a dream and you can’t remember it unless you think *really* hard. It was like that.”

Eddie swallowed nervously, shuffling closer to Will and pulling their clasped hands into his lap as he squeezed them with his freehand.

“But now it’s like… Now I remember. *All the time*,” Will cried, looking up at Mike.

“Maybe,” Mike started softly, placing a hand on one of Will’s knees making the boy blush slightly. “Maybe that’s good.”

“Good?” Eddie asked, voice high and hysterical.

“Just think about,” Mike nodded, explaining himself. “You’re like a spy now. Spying on the shadow monster.”

“No,” Eddie shook his head, tears springing to his own eyes as he tried to pretend this wasn’t happening to Will.

“If you know what he’s seeing and feeling,” Mike ignored Eddie’s protests. “Maybe that’s how we can stop him. Maybe all of this is happening for a reason.”

“You really think so?” Will asked with a sniffle, looking up into his best friend’s eyes.

“Yeah, I really do,” Mike nodded, squeezing Will’s knee comfortingly.

“But,” Will swallows nervously. “What if he figures out we’re spying on him?”

“What if he spies back?” Eddie moans, looking at the two boys nervously.

“He won’t,” Mike shakes his head confidently.

“How do you know?”

“We won’t let him,” Mike promises, wrapping an arm around his best friend as Eddie squeezed Will’s hand between his own tightly, wishing Richie were there too.

“Will?” Eddie woke with a start, reaching out for his panting friend who was sitting bolt straight up in his bed.

“You okay?” Mike asked, sitting up to look at Will with concern in his own sleeping bag next to Eddie.

“Hopper,” Will gasped, chest rising and falling with his rapid heartbeat.

“Huh?”

“Hopper’s in trouble,” Will rushed, jumping out of his bed and running for his mother. “Mom!”

“Sweetie?” Joyce called from the living room with concern.

“Mom!” Will called again skidding into the living room in front of his mother with Eddie and Mike on his heels.

“What’s wrong?” Joyce asked, reaching out for her son with wide eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s Hopper,” Will gulped.

“What about him?” Joyce asked, holding her son’s shoulders.

“I saw him. He’s in trouble,” Will told her serious. “I think he’s gonna die.”

Mike let out a low groan as Joyce’s bottom lip began to wobble at the news, Eddie’s hand pressed to his mouth to keep in his own gasp.

“Wheeler!” Lucas shouted across the bustling arcade to a glum looking Richie who stood behind the prize counter.

“What?” Richie asked with a yawn, having yet to have gotten a wink of sleep in nearly forty-eight hours.

“I need your help,” Lucas replied, stopping in front of the counter across from Richie.

“With?”

“Max!”

“Ok-ay,” Richie laughed. “I’m listening.”

“You need to help me get Max in the back room so we can talk to her when she comes in,” Lucas rushed.

“That’s some kinky shit, Lucas,” Richie joked making Lucas groan in annoyance.

“No,” Lucas shook his head. “I’m gonna tell her about what’s going on… About El.”

“Absolutely not,” Richie shook his head, suddenly more alert. “Mike would have a shit!”

“We need to tell her, Richie,” Lucas begged. “It’s the only way to get her to stop hating me – us,” Lucas corrected himself.

“Even if I *thought* this was a good idea, I doubt she’ll set foot in this place if she sees me working,” Richie shook his head again.

“Hide in the back with me,” Lucas explained. “We’ll get Keith to bring her back here, I have a whole plan!”

“There’s no way Keith’ll help us,” Richie laughed. “The only way he’d help us is… No!”

“C’mon, Richie,” Lucas begged.

“I’m not whoring out my sister to *Keith*!” Richie guffawed.

“Just because we say Nancy’ll go on a date with him, doesn’t mean she actually has to go on the date,” Lucas rolled his eyes. “It’s called a lie, Richie. I thought you were pretty familiar with them.”

“Fuck off,” Richie snorted. “Well, fine. I’ll be there, but I’m not saying a word about El or Will. You can make your own decision.”

“Thanks man!” Lucas grinned. “You were my last hope. Dustin’s apparently *busy* and Mike’s with Will.”

“Do you know if Eddie’s there too?” Richie asked, trying to appear nonchalant despite the fact that asking about Eddie was all he wanted to do.

“I think so,” Lucas nodded. “Mike called me and told me he and Eddie were spending the night with Will. Apparently, he’s still pretty spooked since the… y’know.”

Richie nodded, picking at a chip in the Formica countertop.

“Are you kidding me?” Max sneered as Keith opened the door to the staff room for her to enter, finding Richie and Lucas waiting with apologetic smiles.

“I better get that date, Wheeler,” Keith reminded Richie, pointing with a Cheeto dust covered finger at the other teenager.

“Yeah, yeah,” Richie sighed, waving him away.

“So,” Keith grinned, eyeing the three other teenagers. “What’s going on in here, then? Thought you had a boyfriend, Wheeler?”

“Seriously,” Richie laughed. “Fuck off, Keith!”

“Have fun,” Keith grinned, winking at the others as he closed the door to the staff room.

“What is this shit?” Max groaned as soon as the door was closed, scowling at the two boys.

“I needed a safe place,” Lucas starts, moving towards Max.

“A safe place to what? Be creepy?” Max laughs. “Congrats you found it!”

“Listen, I’m gonna tell you the truth about what happened last year with Will and El,” Lucas sighed as Richie tried to bore a hole into the ground with his stare. “But if anyone finds out, we could be arrested. Possibly killed.”

“Killed?” Max snorted, throwing a look towards Richie.

“He’s being serious,” Richie muttered, staring turning his gaze back to the ground uncomfortably.

“I need to know that we can trust you to keep this secret,” Lucas spoke seriously. “Do you accept the risk that comes with me telling you about what happened?”

Max bit her bottom lip, looking between Richie and Lucas, Richie’s eyes pointedly avoiding hers.

“Richie clearly doesn’t want me to know,” Max muttered, crossing her arms over her chest self-consciously.

“I-” Richie stuttered, at an uncharacteristic loss for words.

“Do you accept the risk?” Lucas pressed.

“Oh, my God! This is so stupid!” Max grumbled, pacing in irritated circles.

“*Do you accept the risk*?”

“Fine! Yeah,” Max sighed, throwing her hands up in the air in defeat. “I accept the risk!”

“Last year,” Lucas swallows, settling back on a desk chair in the dingy staff room. “Will didn’t get lost in the woods…”

“Then where did he get lost?” Max asked, leaning back against a broken-down arcade game and blowing a strand of hair from her face.

Eddie stood next to Mike, shifting his weight back and forth between his left and right foot as he chewed nervously on the inside of his cheek, watching Will frantically scribble on a sheet of paper.

“Stop,” Mike whispered, placing a hand on Eddie’s shoulder to stop his swaying.

“Sorry,” Eddie muttered as Will dropped the pencil crayon.

“Is this where you saw him?” Joyce questioned her son, picking up the drawing to scrutinize it closely. “Is this where you saw Hopper?”

“I think so,” Will whispered as Mike leant forward to squeeze his shoulder comfortingly. “Yeah.”

“Okay,” Joyce murmured, moving back to look for where the new drawing fit into the rest of the puzzle covering their entire home.

“Here, lemme see?” Eddie asked, reaching out for the drawing.

“Eddie’s great with directions, mom,” Will promised as Joyce hesitated. “He can memorize maps no problem.”

“Okay,” Joyce nodded, handing the piece of paper to Eddie.

“Thanks,” Eddie muttered, squinting down at the drawing before looking up and roaming his gaze across the walls. “Okay we need to find a kind of fork in the road,” he instructed as Joyce and Mike scanned the walls.

“Hmm, in here!” Mike called from the kitchen, pointing at the wall by the fridge as the other three came running into the room.

“Okay,” Joyce nodded, taking the sheet from Eddie and taping it up where Mike had pointed to. “So… so Hopper is here?”

“Yeah,” Mike nodded.

“Now we just need to find out where here is,” Eddie sighed glumly.

“Did he say anything?” Mike asked Joyce. “Hopper, I mean. Did he say anything before he left?”

“Uh, some something about vines?”

“Vines?” Eddie murmured, chewing on his lip as he tried to think of a place in Hawkins where they’d find vines.

“Mom!” Will called from the front room as the sound of an approaching car came in through the window.

“Hopper?” Joyce breathed, rushing towards the front door with Mike and Eddie following behind her obediently.

“It’s Bob,” Mike announced unnecessarily as they all watched him leave his vehicle and approach the door.

“Shit,” Joyce muttered as she opened the door and slipped out onto the porch.

“Surprise,” Bob grinned, stepping up onto the porch to press a kiss to Joyce’s lips. “I would've called, but you said not to clog up the line!”

“You know,” Joyce rushed, eyes scanning the forest around her home nervously. “We're fine, we don't need anything.”

“When I was sick as a kid, and I was sick all the time as a kid,” Bob

laughed, missing Joyce's clear panic. "Nothing made me feel better than focusing on these brain teasers."

"Those are great," Joyce smiled, face softening at Bob's thoughtfulness.

"I could teach him how to play!"

"No!"

"No?" Bob laughed again, eyebrows scrunching in confusion.

"You know, he's sleeping right now…"

"Okay," Bob smiled, moving towards the door. "I'll wait with you."

"Listen, it's just not a good time," Joyce apologized, moving to block the front door from Bob's path. "But, um, you know what? I'll call you, okay?"

"Okay, well, I'll leave these for Will," Bob nodded, handing Joyce the stack of puzzles and games.

"Thank you," Joyce smiled again, kissing Bob's cheek.

"And if he needs any help, have him call me," Bob pressed. "They don't call me Bob the Brain for nothing."

Joyce laughed, watching as Bob made his way towards the car.

"Wait," Joyce whispered, thinking about what Bob had said. "Bob!"

"That's my name!" Bob smiled at Joyce with one foot in his car.

"I need your help!"

"Huh," Bob hummed in shock as he looked at the maze of blue lines crisscrossing across every surface of the house. "You drew all of these yourself?"

"Mhm," Will nodded, avoiding Bob's gaze embarrassedly.

“Huh,” Bob repeated, still staring at the drawings.

“Why, exactly?”

“I told you the rules,” Joyce reminded. “No questions.”

“Right,” Bob nodded, hands in his pockets.

“So, we need you to help us figure out,” Joyce started, leading the group to the kitchen. “Where *this* is,” she pointed at the newest drawing they had added before Bob’s arrival, scribbling an X over it in orange crayon.

“Find the X?”

“Yeah, find the X,” Joyce nodded.

“What’s at the X?” Bob laughed, looking around the room at the stony faces staring back at him. “Pirate’s treasure.”

“Bob,” Joyce sighed. “No questions.”

“Okay,” Bob nodded. “Can I talk to you for a second?” Bob asked, grabbing Joyce’s hand and leading her into another room.

“What?”

“Joyce, you can talk to me,” Bob whispered, staring at Joyce’s wild eyes with concern. “You know that, right?”

“Of course!”

“What's going on here, exactly?”

“What do you mean?”

“Joyce, Will doesn't look well,” Bob told her gently. “*You* don't look well.”

“Nothing’s going on,” Joyce shook her head.

“Is this an episode? Is this one of Will's episodes?”

“No!” Joyce insisted, eyes wide and panicked again.

“No?” Bob sighed, knowing Joyce was lying. “I'm sorry, I just I don't see how any of this is good for Will, or for you.”

“Everything’s fine!”

“And even if I wanted to play along, I mean, how could I figure anything out if I don't understand the context of the game?” Bob continued, ignoring Joyce’s lie. “Or…”

“Or, what?”

“I know that shape,” Bob murmured, staring at one of the drawings behind Joyce’s head.

“What is it?”

“It’s Lovers’ Lake!”

“Lovers’ Lake?”

“Yeah,” Bob nodded, walking back out into the hallway. “I get it now!”

“You get it?” Joyce asked, following Bob in confusion.

“That’s Lake Jordan,” Bob pointed, making his way to the kitchen. “Uh… Sattler’s quarry…”

The three boys looked up as Bob entered the room, listening as he pointed out various Hawkins landmarks.

“Of course!” Eddie exclaimed, recognizing the map that Bob was reading out.

“And there’s…” Bob trailed off.

“Eno River,” Bob and Eddie finished together.

“Do you guys see it?” Eddie asked, grinning at the other three who stared at the walls blankly.

“So, the lines aren’t roads,” Bob nodded.

“No,” Eddie agreed. “But they *act* like roads.”

“And they act like roads ‘cause when you follow ‘em you’ll see they don’t go over water,” Bob explained excitedly. “And that's the giveaway. Ha! That's the giveaway.”

“So,” Eddie started, blinking as he tried to sort out his thoughts. “It's not a puzzle, it's a map… of Hawkins?”

“And that was the last we saw or heard of her,” Lucas finishes, Max staring at him in amazement as Richie fidgeted behind the manager’s desk, chewing on his thumbnail. “After that, she was just gone.”

“I can’t believe it’s been that long,” Richie croaks, interrupting for the first time since the beginning of Lucas’ story. “Feels like yesterday,” he continued, blinking back tears.

“Wow,” Max hummed as Lucas nodded.

“I know, it’s crazy.”

“Yeah,” Max nodded. “But I liked it.”

“Liked it?” Richie asks, eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

“I mean, I had a few issues,” Max continues.

“Issues?”

“I felt it was a little derivative in parts."

“What are you talking about?” Lucas asks, eyes squinted in confusion.

“I just wish it had a little more originality, that’s all.”

“You don’t believe it?” Richie asks, pushing himself up to stand next to Lucas.

“Guys, c’mon, seriously?” Max laughs, moving to grab her skateboard and leave. “How gullible do you think I am?”

“Why would we make this up?”

“I don’t know, to impress me or something?” Max answers.

“I tell you all of this,” Lucas groans, squinting in disbelief at the redhead. “I mean, top-secret stuff. Risking my life and this is how you react?”

“Risking your life?”

“This isn’t funny, Max,” Richie hisses angrily as Max laughs at Lucas’ words.

“I mean… kind of funny,” Max nods. “Stupid, but funny,” she snorts before finally leaving the room.

“I told you this was a stupid idea,” Richie shoots at Lucas before following the girl out the door.

“Max, stop! Where are you going?”

“Story time's over, isn't it?”

“What's wrong with you?” Lucas begged, grabbing Max’s wrist. “I gave you what you wanted."

“I wanted to be a part of the group, not a part of some joke!”

“It's not a joke,” Richie insists.

“You guys did a good job, okay? You can go tell the others I believed your lies if it gets you experience points or whatever.”

“Listen,” Lucas sighs. “We have a lot of rules in our party, but the most important is… *friends don’t lie… ever*.”

“Then how do you explain luring me into the back of the arcade with a fake out of order sign?” Max shoots back, crossing her arms over her chest.

“We had to do that,” Lucas sighed. “To protect you.”

“To protect me from who, exactly?” Max snorted. “The big bad government baddies from Hawkins Lab?”

“Max!” Richie hisses, towering over the girl with a serious glare “Lower your voice.”

“Or, *maybe* it was to protect me from the Demogorgon from another dimension!”

“Max, I’m serious, shut the fuck up right now!”

“Oh, no, no! You know what it was? It was Eleven,” Max laughs throwing her arms wide dramatically.

“Max, seriously, shut up,” Richie booms, covering her mouth with his hand. “You're going to get us killed.”

“You're serious?” Max asked after a pause, eyes wide.

“Wish we weren’t,” Richie nodded, stepping back from Max.

“Prove it, then,” Max decides, watching the two boys carefully.

“Can’t.”

“So, what? I'm supposed to just trust you guys?”

“Yeah,” Lucas nodded.

“Shit,” Maxed groaned, looking over her shoulder as Billy pulled into the parking lot. “I gotta go.”

“Max, wait, you can’t-”

“*Don’t* follow me out!” she called over her shoulder, pushing through the door to the arcade.

“Fuck,” Richie groaned, kicking the Dig Dug machine behind him.

“There’s nothing,” Mike breathed, eyes wide as they barreled down

the road to the spot Bob and Eddie were *sure* Hopper was.

“Are we close?” Joyce asked desperately, eyes on the road.

“We’re in the vicinity,” Bob nodded making Joyce sigh with irritation. “I’m sorry, but it’s not precise.”

“But we did all that work!”

“The scale ratio isn’t exactly one-to-one,” Eddie added, support Bob. “We needed-”

“Turn right!”

“Will?” Eddie jumped, turning to look at his sweaty and tired friend. “What’s going on?”

“I *said* turn right!”

“How do you know?”

“I saw it… in my now memories,” Will answered quietly.

“Your what?”

“Just turn right, okay?!

“Okay,” Joyce sighed, jamming the wheel to the right. “Ah, shit!”

All five of them screamed as the car lurched right, barrelling down a hill towards Hopper’s cruiser only to stop centimeters from Hopper’s bumper.

“Holy fucking shit,” Eddie whispered under his breath.

“What’s Jim doing here?” Bob asked, looking at the other four with an amused expression.

“Boys, stay here,” Joyce threw over her shoulder before exiting the car.

“Mom, wait, no!” Will cried, reaching out for his mother. “It’s not safe!”

“That’s why I need you to stay here,” she told him firmly before slamming the drivers’ side door.

“It’s not safe,” Will sighed, peering down into the hole Bob and Joyce had disappeared through.

“They’ll be okay,” Mike nodded, trying to convince himself as much as the other two boys.

“Do you hear that?” Eddie asked, listening as revving engines approached the pumpkin patch. “Oh, shit, guys!”

“No!”

“Shit, shit!” Eddie hissed as lab agents poured out of vehicles surrounding them and jumping down into the hole with blow torches.

“They shouldn’t be going down there,” Will shook his head, sweat dripping off his body.

“It’s okay,” Mike repeated. “It’s gonna be okay-Will!”

“Oh, my God! Will,” Eddie cried, collapsing on the ground and ignoring the dirt beneath his fingers for the first time since he was a child as he watched his convulsing friend helplessly. “Will! Will are you okay? Will!”

6. The Spy

Notes for the Chapter:

I dont know anymore man.

“Will,” Eddie sobbed, snot running down his face and mixing with his salty tears as he held on to Will’s gurney as they rushed through the hallways of Hawkins’ Lab. “Will!”

Mike followed behind, stumbling as his eyes followed his writhing friend's body, face slack with dumbfounded shock.

“Will!” Eddie continued to sob behind his hands which were now cupped over his mouth as the group stopped in a patient room.

“Will?” a nurse asked, trying to pry his eyelids open. “Where does it hurt?”

“All over,” Will shrieked behind the oxygen mask that had been put over his face, making Eddie let out another sob “Everywhere!”

“Joyce says he feels like he’s burning,” Dr. Owens called. “Check him for burns.”

“Ahh!” Will screamed, back arching off the bed in pain as he cried. “Ow! Ah!”

“Will,” Eddie continued to whimper, Mike’s arm now wrapped around Eddie's shoulders as he continued to stare on in shock.

“Will, where does it hurt the most?”

“Everywhere!” Will screamed again. “Everywhere! It hurts everywhere!”

“Okay, Will, okay,” the nurse soothed as another plunged a needle filled with tranquilizer into his arm.

“Will!” Joyce cried, Bob holding her back from rushing towards her son. “My baby!”

“Eddie,” Mike whispered, pressing his palm over Eddie’s bouncing knee.

Joyce had gone off to talk to Will’s doctors, leaving Bob, Mike and Eddie with a sleeping Will.

“Sorry,” Eddie whispered, sniffling and wiping his face. “Just…. Don’t like hospitals,” Eddie mumbled, staring down at his shaking hands as his knee started bouncing again.

“It’s okay,” Bob told him softly. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“I just…” Eddie swallowed, moving to scratch at his forearms with opposite hands.

“It’s okay,” Mike repeated, hand still on Eddie’s bouncing knee. “I know.”

“Thanks,” Eddie whispered, scratching harder at his warm and itchy arms.

“Eddie,” Mike continued warily, both hands hovering near Eddie. “Richie’s not here so I… You need to stop. Can I… I’m gonna touch you, is that okay? I don’t want to make you more upset.”

“Please don’t,” Eddie whimpered, shaking his head as he stood and moved to the opposite side of Will’s bed so Mike couldn’t reach him. “I-I’ll stop.”

Mike nodded as Eddie’s hands dropped to his sides, fingers twitching to scratch at his crawling skin again.

“You good?”

“I need Richie,” Eddie whispered, voice too quiet for the other two to hear.

“What was that Eddie?” Bob asked, moving to reach out for him only to be stopped by Mike with a sharp shake of his head.

“I-I-I need *Ri-rich-chee*,” Eddie whimpered, hands coming to flutter over his throat as they always did when he had a panic attack.

“It’s okay, Eddie,” Mike rushed, moving to grab Eddie’s covered shoulders, the safest bet when trying to touch Eddie. “You’re okay. We’re gonna see him soon. Just sit down and try to breathe…”

“Rich,” Eddie gasped, sitting down and curling his knees up to his chest. “Need Rich…”

“What did they say?” Eddie asked, jumping from his chair as soon as Joyce had entered the room. His eyes were red and wild with concern as Mike snoozed in the chair closest to Will’s bed.

“Nothing sweetie, nothing,” Joyce shook her head, not wanting to panic the anxious boy.

Eddie nodded, swallowed as he sat back in his chair near Mike to sit and listen as Joyce finally explained what had happened to Will the previous year to a shocked Bob.

“What the fuck is going on, Lucas?!” Richie shouted as he followed Lucas down the street on his bike toward Max’s house.

“Dustin,” Lucas huffed from the exertion of pedaling. “We gotta meet him. He said something about Dart being a baby Demogorgon-”

“WHAT?!” Richie screamed, eyes wide and bike wobbling with his shock.

“Yeah, and it gets weirder,” Lucas continued. “He’s with Steve Harrington right now.”

“WHAT?!”

“I know,” Lucas nodded. “We gotta get Max and go meet them. I don’t know what the fuck’s going on but it’s not good.”

“Fuck,” Richie groaned under his breath.

“Nice, I love this song,” Richie nodded along to the music pumping from inside the Mayfields’ house as Lucas rolled his eyes, leaning forward to ring the doorbell again.

“What are you doing here?!” Max hissed as she opened the door, slamming it shut quickly so her stepbrother wouldn’t notice the two teenage boys on their door step.

“We have proof,” Lucas told her confidently.

“What?”

“Proof that what we told you was real!”

“I didn’t tell anyone *shit*!” Richie protested with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Whatever,” Lucas rolled his eyes. “We have to hurry though!”

“What kind of proof?” Max sighed.

“Just come with us and you’ll see!”

“Okay,” Max groaned. “Around back, my window is the one on the left. Go before my brother sees you guys. I’ll meet you there!”

“Will!” Mike gasped as he heard his best friend groan and shift around in his bed. “Will’s awake!”

“Sweetie,” Joyce cried, moving forward to take Will’s hands in her own as Eddie moved to the side of the bed and Bob ran to find a doctor. “How are you feeling?”

“Um,” Will croaked, voice scratchy from all of his yelling the previous night. “Alright.”

“You’re awake!” Dr. Owens called from the door, entering the room with Bob and a group of other nurses and doctors. Eddie swallowed, shifting closer to the bed and fisting Will’s bed sheets in his hands as he watched the medical professionals approach.

“Yes,” Will nodded, voice soft as Dr. Owens approached, grabbing his pen light and moving to flash it in Will’s eyes painfully.

“Do you know your name?”

“Will.”

“Your full name?”

“William Byers,” Will answered nervously as Eddie tutted in annoyance at the doctor.

“Good,” Dr. Owens nodded, putting away his pen light. “Do you know who I am?”

“A doctor?” Will asked nervously.

“Have we met before?”

“Um,” Will’s eyes shot towards his mother. “I don’t think so.”

“Hm,” Dr. Owens hummed with a strained smile. “You don’t remember me?”

“Sorry,” Will shook his head apologetically.

“That’s okay,” the doctor nodded. “What about this big guy over here?” Dr. Owens smiled as he nodded towards Mike.

“Um, that’s my best friend. Mikey,” Will answered with a blush, the use of the nickname also making Mike blush. Richie was the only one that called him that anymore. “And that’s Eddie.”

Eddie smiled at his friend with teary eyes.

“What about me, kid?” Hopper asked with a smile. “’Member me?”

“No,” Will answered quietly making Hopper frown slightly.

“They told me you helped save me last night,” Hopper continued. “You remember that?”

“No.”

“Do you remember anything about last night?” Dr. Owens asked as Eddie clutched the rungs of the hospital bed footboard nervously. “About what happened?”

“They hurt me,” Will answered, face scrunched as he tried to remember the previous day.

“You mean the doctors?”

“No,” Will shook his head. “The soldiers.”

“Soldiers?” Eddie squeaked making Will eye him curiously.

“The soldiers hurt you?” Dr. Owens questioned.

“They shouldn’t have done that,” Will answered darkly, voice serious and steely. “It upset him.”

“Upset him?” Dr. Owens asked as all of the others in the room shared confused looks. “Is this him?” Dr. Owens asked, pulling out a picture of Will’s Shadow Monster drawing.

“Yes,” Will breathed, eyes wide and terrified.

“Okay, it’s okay,” Dr. Owens told him. “I wanna try something. It’s gonna seem a little odd at first but I think it’s really gonna help us understand what’s going on. Is that okay, Will?”

Will nodded hesitantly as Eddie watched with wide and worried eyes.

“Okay, we’ll be right back,” Dr. Owens nodded before leaving the room with the rest of the lab workers.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Eddie whined as the door shut, leaving them in Will’s room alone. Eddie had grown up as a lab rat, his mom constantly signing him up for new medical treatments for health problems that he didn’t actually have. “I don’t trust them!”

“Eddie,” Mike hissed, giving him a serious look. “Shut up, they could be watching,” Mike muttered, moving his lips as little as possible.

“Okay,” Dr. Owens announced, entering the room without bothering to knock. “Now we’ve gone to get some supplies,” Dr. Owens explained as a few soldiers rolled in a tank holding a black and slimy vine.

Eddie toppled backwards into a chair, flinching away from the writhing, snake-like organism.

“Now, Will, I want you to just let us know if you feel anything. Okay?”

“Okay,” Will nodded as they all watched one of the lab workers pull out a blow torch.

“What the fuck,” Eddie breathed, clutching Mike’s forearm as they sat back on a lab bench with Hopper.

“Do you feel anything?” Owens asked, voice cautious and worried.

“Li-little sting,” Will whined, watching as the lab worker lowered the blow torch closer to the piece of vine.

“It stings? Where?” Dr. Owens asked as the worker continued to lower the torch and Eddie’s grip on Mike’s arm became steadily more painful.

“My chest,” Will gasped, grabbing at his heart.

“Sweetie,” Joyce sighed, reaching for her son.

“Okay,” Dr. Owens nodded at the worker who lowered the torch even closer. “How about now?”

“It burns!” Will choked painfully. “Ah! It burns!”

“Where?”

“Everywhere!” Will screamed, making Eddie squeeze Mike’s arm so tightly that his nails drew blood. Mike was far too engrossed in watching his friend to notice, barely flinching at the sharp sting.

“That’s enough! That’s enough!” Joyce called, face panic stricken.

“Stop!” Eddie moaned in the background, whimpering worriedly.

“Stop!” Hopper shouted, rushing forward. “You heard her! That’s enough, Owens!”

“Okay, okay,” Dr. Owens nodded to the lab worker who immediately turned the blow torch off. “We’re done. It’s okay.”

Eddie watched as Will’s heart rate returned to normal on the monitor, releasing Mike’s now bright red arm. Eddie looked down as Mike hissed and rubbed at his wrist in pain.

“Shit, Mike!” Eddie jumped off the lab bench, looking for bandages to cover up the scratches. “I’m so sorry!”

“It’s okay,” Mike nodded understandingly.

“What the *hell* is taking so long?” Joyce groaned, knees bouncing nervously as they waited in Will’s room to hear back from Dr. Owens.

“Hey,” Bob soothed, placing a hand over one of Joyce’s knees. “Doctor’s *always* take forever. Just try and relax. Be patient.”

“Not very good at patient,” Joyce muttered, staring out into the open hallway where soldiers were standing guard. “You know, I just-” Joyce rambled, standing up from the chair and heading towards the soldiers.

“Joyce?” Bob sighed, moving to follow his girlfriend who had begun to try and force herself past the soldiers in search of Dr. Owens.

“Let me through!” Joyce screamed. “Let me through! I need to talk to him!”

“Will?” Mike spoke, shaking his friend’s shoulder as the smaller boy stared intently through the doorway and out to where his mother was fighting with the lab workers. “Will!”

“Yeah?” Will gasped, blinking and looking over at Mike and Eddie as though he had just realized they were in the room.

“What’s wrong?” Eddie asked, holding Will’s blanket covered ankle. “Are you hurting again?”

“No, I uh-” Will swallowed, blinking over at his screaming mother. “I saw something.”

“In your now-memories?” Mike asked, leaning forward interestedly.

“Yeah,” Will nodded, licking his dry lips. “It was the Shadow Monster…”

“I said medium-well,” Richie screamed across the junkyard as he approached Dustin and Steve with the other two teenagers, referring to the raw meat they were carrying around.

“Who’s that?” Steve asked Dustin, watching as Richie and Lucas approached on their bikes, Max trailing behind them nervously on foot.

“What the fuck,” Dustin hissed, shaking his head.

“You told her?!” Dustin whisper shouted, huddling with Richie and Lucas as Steve and Max scavenged the junkyard for supplies to board up the old, rusted bus in the junkyard.

“I didn’t do shit,” Richie shook his head, answering at the same time as Lucas scoffed a nonchalant *‘So, what?’*.

“*So, what?*” Dustin laughed. “You’re kiddin’ right?!”

“You wanted to tell her too,” Lucas protested.

“But I didn’t!” Dustin spat back. “We agreed not to tell her and to look for Dart!”

“Who you *oh so* conveniently found,” Lucas shot back, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You think I’m lyin’?”

“I’m just saying,” Lucas drawled, eyes squinted suspiciously. “You have a creepy little bond with him.”

“True,” Richie nodded, backing Lucas up.

“Well, that was *before* he turned into a Demogorgon!” Dustin argued.

“And you haven’t heard from Mike?” Lucas asked.

“No.”

“Or Eddie?” Richie added. “Or Will?”

“Nope.”

“Hopper?” Lucas tried.

“Goddammit,” Dustin swore with irritation. “No! No one is around! I’ve been calling for help since yesterday! Why else do you think I would go to *Steve Harrington?*”

“Fair point,” Richie snorted, eyeing his sister’s boyfriend across the junkyard.

“Something’s-”

“Wrong,” Dustin nodded, interrupting Lucas. “I agree. Which is *why* we need as much help as we can get right now.”

“She didn’t believe me anyway,” Lucas muttered, staring over at Max.

“You probably didn’t tell it right.”

“*Yeah*,” Lucas snorted, eyes squinting at Dustin in disbelief. “*That* must be it.”

“So, are we good-” Dustin was cut off by the loud banging of metal on metal.

“Hey! Dickheads!” Steve shouted, smacking a metal sheet against the car the three had been leaning up against. “How come the only one helping me out is this random girl?”

“We’re having a serious conversation here, Harrington,” Richie glared.

“Well, we lose light in forty minutes, so let’s get moving!”

“Whatever,” Richie rolled his eyes, grumbling about following orders from *Steve Douche-Nozzle Harrington*.

Eddie shuffled into the boardroom filled with doctors and lab workers, fingernails digging painfully into his forearms and teeth biting down on his bottom lip. Eddie hadn’t wanted to leave Will’s room for the boardroom crowded with medical professionals, but when Mike had insisted on going with Will he had decided going was better than remaining in the lab room alone.

Eddie slumped into the chair next to Mike, nervously eyeing the photographs on the boardroom table depicting the vine drawings currently covering the Byers’ house. Will sat on the other side of Mike, wide eyes roaming the collection of polaroid shots.

“Sam, this is ludicrous,” one of the lab workers groaned at Dr. Owens as the entire room watched Will with baited breath.

“Just give him a minute, okay?”

“We don’t have time!”

“Hey, jackass,” Hopper interrupted angrily. “Why don’t you do us all a favour and shut up, okay?”

The corners of Eddie’s mouth twitched with amusement and pride at Hopper’s defense of Will.

The room feel into another lapse of silence, the only sounds to be

heard were the steady scratch of Eddie's fingernails against his rubbed-raw skin and Will's roaming footsteps as he circled the edge of the boardroom table, looking at the different shots.

"That's it!" Will gasped, pointing at an image showing the connection point of various vines.

"That's what?" Dr. Owens asked. "What, what's there, Will?"

"I… I don't know," Will swallowed, squinting at the picture critically. "I just know he doesn't want me to see there. I think it's important."

Eddie's eyes widened at Will's statement as he turned to stare at Mike's face, his expression mirrored perfectly on the taller boy's face.

"So, you really fought one of these things before?" Max asked, crouching on one of the old rusted bus chairs, looking around at Dustin, Richie, and Steve as Lucas kept watch from the emergency escape in the bus's roof while the sun set.

"Yup," Dustin nodded, sighing heavily.

"And you're, like, totally, 100% sure it wasn't a bear?" Max continued critically.

"Holy fuck, Max," Dustin groaned, pacing along the edge of the bus as Steve sat flicking a Zippo lighter and Richie watched on in annoyance. "Don't be an idiot, okay? It wasn't a bear! Why are you even here if you don't believe us? Just go home."

"Wow," Max rolled her eyes, moving to climb the ladder to the roof where Lucas was stationed. "Someone's cranky, past your bedtime?"

"That's good," Steve snorted as Dustin dropped down on the chair next to him, making Richie's eyebrows scrunch in confusion. "Just show her you don't care."

"I don't," Dustin replied haughtily.

"Okay," Steve snorted again, making Richie smile in amusement despite himself.

“So,” Richie sighed as they fell into silence. “Why you slumming it with Dustin? Where’s Nance?”

“Uh,” Steve flicked the lighter closed and flexed his jaw nervously. “We actually broke up…”

“You did?”

“Yup,” Steve nodded, his response popping sadly in his mouth.

“Why?” Richie sneered, ready to defend Nancy’s honour.

“Can’t force someone to love you,” Steve shrugged. “Nancy wasn’t happy with me.”

“Oh,” Richie let out a noise of surprise. “Well… Sorry, man. That’s shit.”

“Not your fault,” Steve shrugged again, flicking his Zippo again.

“Woah,” Max breathed as she settled on the roof of the bus next to Lucas. “This is kinda awesome.”

“Huh?” Lucas grunted, eyes focused on his binoculars.

“The fog, I mean,” Max pointed down at the foggy ground of the junkyard. “Kinda looks like the ocean...”

“You miss it?” Lucas asked, binoculars dropping to his lap as he turned to study the redhead.

Max shrugged.

“Bet Hawkins seems pretty lame compared to California,” Lucas laughed self-consciously, as though he was talking about himself being lame rather than their sleepy little town.

“No, not really,” Max shook her head, playing with the hem of her jeans nervously. “Just…”

“Yeah?”

“My dad,” Max whispered. “He’s still there. So… yeah.”

“Why?”

“It's this legal term called divorce,” Max joked making Lucas smile softly. “My mom and my stepdad, they wanted a fresh start away from him.”

“Oh,” Lucas commented.

“Yeah, as if *he* was the problem, which is total bull,” Max groaned angrily. “And now things are even worse!”

“How so?” Lucas asked softly, shifting closer to Max.

“I don’t know,” Max sighed. “I mean, my stepbrother's always been a dick, but now he's just angry all the time and he can't take it out on my mom, so-”

“He takes it out on you?” Lucas guessed, jaw clenching at the thought of Billy treating Max poorly.

“I don't even know why I'm telling you this,” Max groaned embarrassedly, regretting opening up this much but she couldn’t stop herself once she had started. “It's just, I know that I can be a jerk like him sometimes and I don't want to be like him ever but… I guess I'm angry, too, and- I'm sorry. Jesus! What's wrong with me?”

“Hey,” Lucas smiled, bumping her with his shoulder playfully. “It’s okay. You're nothing like your brother, okay? You're cool and different and smart… And you're, like, *totally tubular*.”

“Nobody actually says that, you know,” Max snorted, leaning into Lucas ever so slightly.

“Well, I do now,” Lucas laughed, shifting so his arm closest to Max was resting on the metal roof behind her. “I like talking with you, Mad Max.”

“And I like talking with you, stalker,” Max smiled up at Lucas, only to

jolt away from him at the sound of a beastly cry ringing through the forest. “What was that?”

“You ready for some proof?”

“No,” Max shook her head, eyes wide as they looked out at the junkyard.

“Holy fuck,” Richie groaned, peering out through a metal grating at the junkyard with Steve and Dustin.

“You see him?” Steve asked, eyes searching for any sign of Dart.

“No,” Richie shook his head.

“Lucas, what's going on?” Dustin shouted up towards the hole in the roof.

“Hold on! I've got eyes! Ten o'clock! Ten o'clock!”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Richie chanted. “There!”

“What's he doing?” Dustin hissed as they watched the creature nose around the junkyard.

“Fuck if I know…”

“You sure that’s not a dog?” Max asked loudly, making all four boys groan collectively.

“He's not taking the bait,” Steve panted. “Why is he not taking the bait?”

“Maybe he's not hungry?”

“Maybe he’s sick of cow,” Richie snorted, referring to the chunks of cow meat Dustin and Steve had trailed through the forest all day.

“Maybe he’s sick of cow?” Steve laughed at Richie before sobering up and pushing himself up to his feet. “Wait, yeah! Maybe he’s sick of cow!”

“Steve?”

“Steve, what are you doing? Steve?”

“Just get ready,” Steven called over his shoulder, tossing Dustin his lighter before exiting the rusted bus with his nail-covered baseball bat.

“What the *fuck*,” Richie hissed, watching in astonishment as Steve approached Dart, whistling to him as if he was a dog. “Dude’s fucked in the head!”

“What’s he doing?” Max hissed as she climbed down the ladder into the cab of the bus.

“Expanding the menu,” Dustin explained, watching Steve with rapt attention.

“He’s insane,” Max shook her head, watching as Steve stopped a few yards away from the creature.

“No, he’s awesome,” Dustin smiled.

“Usually I’d agree,” Richie whispered. “But it’s *Steve*.”

“Shut up, Richie,” Dustin rolled his eyes. “Wait, Steve! Steve, watch out!”

“A little busy here!” Steve called over his shoulder, eyes so trained on the baby Demogorgon that he missed the others approaching from the woods.

“Three o'clock! Three o'clock!” Lucas shouted frantically from the roof of the bus.

“Steve! Steve! Abort! Abort!”

“Steve, run!”

“Steve, hurry!”

The four teenagers screamed across the junkyard at Steve as he

noticed the other Demogorgons and began sprinting back to the bus.

“Shit!” Steve shouted, landing on the hard ground of the bus as Dustin and Richie pushed heavy metal siding in front of the door to block the Demogorgons.

“Are they rabid or something?”

“I know they say there’s no such thing as a stupid question, Max,” Richie shouted, holding the metal barricade in place with his feet. “But that’s a stupid ass question!”

“They can't get in! They can't!” Lucas shouted, jumping down from the ladder to watch Richie and Steve hold the metal barricade in place.

“Shit! Is anyone there?” Dustin screamed into his radio behind them as the Demogorgon’s smashed at the windows and metal barricading the bus. “Mike? Will? God! Anyone! Shit! We're at the old junkyard, and we are going to die!”

“Guys,” Max breathed, watching as the metal roof dented with what appeared to be footsteps. “Guys! Oh, my God!” she wailed as a Demogorgon pushed its head through the hole in the ceiling.

“Out of the way! Out of the way!” Steve shouted, pushing Max back and wielding his bat.

“Max!” Lucas shouted, rushing forward to pull Max back against him and away from the ladder.

“You want some? Come get it!”

The Demogorgon shrieked at Steve before pausing and looking up as though it was being called before it fled, jumping from the bus.

“What?”

“What happened?” Richie asked Steve, standing from his spot where he was holding the metal.

“You okay?” Lucas whispered to Max, grabbing her hand and

squeezing it in reassurance.

“Yeah,” Max nodded, gulping for breath.

The two dropped each other's hands as Dustin cleared his throat pointedly, making them both blush crimson as they took a step away from one another.

“*Hello*?! What the *fuck* just happened?” Richie repeated.

“Steve scared 'em off?” Dustin offered.

“No,” Steve shook his head. “They're going somewhere.”

The group had been escorted back to Will’s room shortly after the boardroom and they were all sitting around and waiting for their next instruction.

“I'm sorry,” Will whimpered suddenly, causing Mike, Eddie, and Joyce to move forward to his bed.

“What?”

“What? What do you mean, sweetie?” Joyce asked, taking one of his hands in her own.

“He made me do it,” Will sobbed, shaking as he looked around the room at the other five faces.

“Who? Who made you do what?”

“I told you,” Will cried. “They upset him!”

“Upset who?” Eddie moaned.

“The Shadow Monster?” Mike asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet nervously.

“They shouldn't have done that,” Will continued, shaking and crying as his eyes seemed to glaze over in terror. "They shouldn't have upset him.”

“The spy,” Mike screamed, making Eddie jump in surprise. “The spy!”

“Mike!” Eddie called, chasing after the teenager as he sprinted out into the hallway. “Wait, Mike!”

“I need to get through!” Mike shouted, flailing and trying to push past the soldiers once again blocking the door to the main lab. “It's a trap! It's a trap! I need to warn them!”

“Mike, what’s going on?” Eddie yelled, trying to be heard over the commotion. “Mike!”

“It’s a trap!”

“Will, sweetie,” Joyce cried, voice shaking as she held the boy’s hands. “Talk to me. You've got to help me understand!”

“It's too late,” Will cried.

“What?”

“You should go now,” Will told her in a strange voice.

“Will, what’s going on!?”

“They're almost here,” Will spoke, voice cold and removed.

7. The Mind Flayer

Notes for the Chapter:

> im sorry this took so long! it's twice as long as most of my chapters to make up for it though....
>
> so basically bob getting the power back up in the lab is exactly the same as in the show so I didnt re-write it....
>
> Hope you all think this was worth the wait! Let me know what you think!

“Shit!” Eddie jumped as sirens began blaring in the hallway.

“No!” Mike yelled. “We’re too late!”

“Too late for what?” Eddie asked, hands covering his ears to block out some of the noise.

“We’re too late!” Mike screamed again, sprinting back to Will’s room with Eddie hot on his heels.

“What’s going on?” Bob asked as the two burst through the door.

“We’re under attack,” Mike gulped, eyes wild with panic.

“What?” Joyce asked, looking between Bob and the two teenagers.

“Shit, he’s the *spy*,” Eddie gasped, finally understanding Mike’s words. “We gotta put Will back to sleep,” Eddie rushed towards the medicine cabinet he had seen the nurses retrieve the tranquilizer from earlier.

“What? No!” Will wailed, pushing himself to sit up in bed.

“Eddie’s right,” Mike nodded, grabbing a new syringe. “He’s a spy and if he knows where we are so does the Shadow Monster!”

“He’s lying,” Will shouted, shooting a pleading look at his mother.

“He killed those soldiers,” Mike yelled, referring to the soldiers that had died in the tunnels after Will pointed out a specific location in the boardroom. “He’ll kill us too!”

“He’s lying! He’s lying!” Will chanted, screaming and flailing as Bob and Joyce tried to soothe him. “He’s lying! He’s lying! He’s lying! He’s lying!”

“Were those gunshots?” Bob cried as the distinct sound of shots being fired could be heard from the hallway.

“Mike, we gotta do this,” Eddie gulped, holding a hand out for the syringes Mike was holding. Mike nodded, handing Eddie the syringes. “Shit, come on, Eddie! Get it together!” he hissed to himself as his hands shook as he tried to draw the tranquilizer up into the syringes. All he could think about was being twelve years old and having insulin shots forced upon him for a month by his mother when she convinced a doctor to give them a prescription for it because she just *knew* Eddie had diabetes and threatened to sue him if he didn't treat Eddie.

“Okay, Will, Will,” Joyce shouted, ignoring Bob’s shout and Will’s chanting. “Listen to me, listen! Do you know who I am?”

Will stared up at his mother, eyes wide and panicked.

“Do you know who I am?”

“You’re…” Will stuttered, words jumbled and confused in his mouth. “You’re… mom?”

“Hold him down,” Joyce spoke to Bob in a low tone, eyes watering as she turned to take one of the newly filled syringes from Eddie. “Baby, I’m sorry.”

“No!” Will shrieked, wriggling under Bob’s hold. Mike moved to help, eyes watering as he watched his friend panic. “Let me go! No! Let me go! Let me go!””

“I’m sorry,” Joyce repeated, tears leaking out of her eyes as she drove the needle into the skin of Will’s arm before pushing down the plunger to inject the tranquilizer. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, head

falling to Will's chest to cry as the boy's small body went limp.

Eddie gasped with surprise as Hopper and Dr. Owens came barrelling through the door to Will's room.

"Oh, my God!" Eddie sighed, hand clutching his chest with fright.

"What happened?" Hopper asked, eyes wide as he took in an unconscious Will with a syringe hanging out of his arm.

"Will-"

"Shit!" Hopper yelled, turning to peer out into the hallway at the heavy security door starting to crumble against the attack from the Demogorgons. "No time, we gotta go! We gotta go!"

Hopper rushed forward, scooping up Will's body before leading the group out into the hallway as the sirens continued to blare.

"Oh, my God!" Eddie screamed as they ran towards a soldier firing a rifle at what looked like a mini Demogorgon. "No!" Eddie cried, feeling as though the world was titling on its axis. This couldn't be happening, not again.

"Eddie," Mike cried, wrapping an arm around Eddie's waist as the boy pitched sideways dizzily. "It's okay, I got'cha."

"In here!" Dr. Owens called, opening a security closet and ushering the group in.

"Come on, Eddie," Mike huffed under Eddie's weight. "You can do it, come on."

"Here," Bob grunted, grabbing Eddie's other arm and hooking it around his neck before helping Mike drag him out of the hallway and to safety.

They deposited Eddie in a chair as Dr. Owens slammed the door behind them, locking it quickly.

"Hey, hey," Mike called, kneeling in front of Eddie and slapping his cheek lightly. "Hey, Eddie, come on. Come on."

“Rich?” Eddie mumbled, head lolling as his vision cleared at the edges.

“Close,” Mike huffed out a small laugh. “It’s Mike, but we’re gonna get to Richie soon. Okay?”

Eddie nodded, swallowing and holding his head as his vision swam.

“Oh, my God,” Mike mumbled as he stood up and turned from Eddie to peer up at the dozens of security screens lining one of the walls, displaying various areas of the lab. Each screen displayed a new scene of death and destruction, showing numerous creatures attacking and feasting on the lab workers. “*Fuck*,” Mike hissed, realizing they were all Demogorgons.

“You're positive that was Dart?”

“*Yes*,” Dustin insisted with a groan. “He had the same exact yellow pattern on his butt.”

“But,” Max added. “He was *tiny* only two days ago…”

“Well, he's molted three times already,” Dustin explained.

“Malted?” Richie asked, eyebrows scrunched in confusion. What did Demogorgons have to do with milkshakes?

“No, molted, dipshit,” Dustin laughed, shaking his head as they trampled through the forest in the direction they had seen the pack of Demogorgons go. “It means he shed his skin to make room for more growth, like hornworms.”

“Oh, I know a thing or two about *horn*worms,” Richie tried to joke, making Max roll her eyes.

“That didn’t even make any sense,” Max laughed.

“Hey, the source material was shit,” Richie protested. “Not my fault!”

“So, when's he gonna molt again?” Steve asked, trying to get the conversation back on track.

“Well, it’s gotta be soon,” Dustin sighed, flashlight sweeping the ground in front of them as they followed the train tracks through the forest. “And when he does, he'll be fully grown… or close to it.”

“And so will his friends,” Steve added.

“Yeah,” Dustin nodded. “And he's gonna eat a lot more than just cats.”

“Wait, cats?” Richie snorted. “Dart ate a cat?”

“No, what?” Dustin blurted, trying to appear nonchalant. “*No.*”

“What are you talking about?” Steve asked, confused by the fact that Dustin was lying to the others. “He ate Mews.”

“Mews? Who's Mews?” Max asked.

“It's Dustin's cat,” Steve explained.

“Steve!” Dustin hissed, glaring at the older boy in exasperation.

“I knew it!” Lucas cried, halting the group with his angry tone. “You kept him!”

“No! No,” Dustin shook his head in protest. “No, I No, I- He missed me. He wanted to come home,” Dustin whined defensively, breaking under Lucas’ glare.

“Bullshit!”

“I didn't know he was a Demogorgon,” Dustin promised. “Okay?”

“Oh, so now you admit it?” Richie asked, crossing his arms over his chest in anger. He was just as upset as Lucas that Dustin had been lying to them.

“Guys, who cares?” Max interrupted, voice desperate with the need to get out of the dark forest where interdimensional creatures could

be lurking. “We have to go!”

“I care!” Lucas shouted, turning back to Dustin. “You put the party in jeopardy! You broke the rule of law!”

“So did you!” Dustin shouted back.

“How?!”

“You told a stranger the truth!”

“A stranger?” Max scoffed, glaring at Dustin.

“You wanted to tell her, too!” Lucas argued back, both ignoring Max’s clear offence.

“But I didn't, Lucas!” Dustin shouted. “I didn't tell her! We both broke the rule of law, okay? So, we're even.”

“We're even?” Lucas laughed.

“Yeah,” Dustin shrugged, pushing his hands into his pockets.

“No, no!” Lucas began shouting again. “We're not even! Your stupid pet could have ate us for dinner!”

“That was not my fault!”

“It was kinda your fault,” Richie agreed with a shrug.

“Guys?” Steve called, trying to gain their attention.

“He wasn't gonna eat us,” Dustin argued back, ignoring Steve and the ominous sound that had come from farther ahead.

“So, he was just coming to say hello?” Richie snorted.

“No-”

“Guys!” Steve shouted again as the noise sounded a second time. This time all four teenagers looked up, clearly hearing the creepy noise. “Let’s go,” Steve called, leading them down the tracks once again.

“Woah, woah,” Max called, trailing behind them. “Why do we have to head *toward* the sound?”

“Hey, guys,” Lucas spoke up as they walked, ignoring Max’s protests. “I’m no Eddie Kaspbrak, but I’m pretty sure I know where we’re heading.”

“Where?” Richie asked, heart clenching at the mention of Eddie.

“The lab,” Lucas told them, voice clear with worry. “They were *going* back home.”

“Of fucking course,” Richie groaned.

“Look, this is us,” Dr. Owens explained as he drew out a map of the lab on an old patient chart. “And this is the nearest exit, but even if we somehow make it there, there's no way out.”

“What do you mean?” Hopper grunted.

“The locks are fail secure.”

“Fail secure?”

“If there's a power outage, the building goes on lockdown.”

“Shit,” Mike swore, leaning back on the wall next to the chair where a dizzy Eddie sat.

“Can it be unlocked remotely?” Bob asked.

“With a computer, sure,” Dr. Ownes nodded. “But somebody's gotta reset the breakers.”

“Where are the breakers?” Hopper asked, picking up the rudimentary map the doctor had drawn.

“Breakers are in the basement, three floors down,” he pointed out on the map. Bob nodded before moving towards the door.

“Hey, where are you going?” Joyce cried, reaching out for her

boyfriend.

“Hello? Who's there?” Jonathan called as he peered out from the security booth into the forest with Nancy. “Who's there?”

“Oh, my God,” Nancy breathed, listening to the trampling footsteps and bobbing lights moving out into the clearing from the forest. “Steve?”

“Nancy?”

“Richie?”

“Hey Nance,” Richie grinned, waving at his sister.

“What are you doing here?” Nancy asked, eyes wide with surprise.

“What are *you* doing here?” Steve shot back.

“We're looking for Mike and Will,” Nancy shrugged.

“They're not in there, are they?” Dustin asked, nodding over his shoulder at the labs.

“We’re not sure,” Jonathan shrugged.

“Do you know if Eddie’s with them?” Richie asked, eyeing the lab warily.

“No idea,” Jonathan shrugged again. “Probably, yeah.”

The group jumped as a loud Demogorgon cry rang out from the lab and across to the security gates.

“Fuck!” Richie swore, blinking back tears as he stalked past Nancy and Jonathan towards the security booth.

“Richie,” Nancy sighed, following her brother. “We already tried.”

“I need to get in there, Nancy!” Richie responded, moving to jab the open button for the security gate repeatedly.

“There’s no power,” Nancy told him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “It won’t open.”

“I’m getting in there,” Richie spat back, slamming his hand against the button angrily as he shook his sister’s hand off.

“Richie,” Nancy groaned.

“I’m getting in there!” Richie hissed, glaring at his sister before pushing past her and moving towards the gate.

“Richie!”

“*I’m going in!”* Richie screamed, eyes wild and murderous as he scanned the shocked faces of the other teenagers. “I need to get to them, Nancy,” Richie swallowed, voice considerably quieter.

“I know, Richie,” Nancy sighed, moving towards her brother. “I understand-”

“No,” Richie shook his head. “You don’t understand. Mike *and* Eddie are in there with those… *things*.”

“Mike’s my brother as well,” Nancy argued. “And you know I care about Eddie-”

“It’s not the same, Nancy!” Richie shouted, shaking his head with exasperation. “Even with Mike, it’s not the same!”

“How?” Nancy asked, voice rising with her own anger. “How is it not the same? He’s my little brother-”

“I don’t *exist* without them!” Richie screamed, arms spread and tears springing from my eyes. “Mike is… is my best friend. He’s half of who I fucking *am*, Nancy! And Eddie is… everything. He’s my whole life. Anything happens to them and *I’m* over. I don’t exist in a world without Mike and Eddie. I’m not me without them!”

“Richie,” Nancy whispered, eyes brimming with her own tears as Richie sobbed and the rest of the group watched on with wide eyes. “It’s okay.”

“I need them, Nance,” Richie cried, allowing his sister to envelope him in a hug. “I need to get to them. They *need* to be okay!”

“They’re gonna be okay, Richie,” Nancy whispered. “I promise.”

“You don’t know-”

“*I promise*,” Nancy repeated, hushing her brother.

“Shit, guys!” Dustin cried, interrupting the moment. “Look, I think the power’s back!”

“I got it,” Jonathan announced, running towards the security booth and pressing the ‘Open’ button repeatedly. “Shit, come on!”

“Lemme try,” Richie groaned, pushing Jonathan out of the way in his haste. “C’mon, c’mon, c’mon! Motherfucker!” Richie swore, smacking at the unresponsive button frantically.

"Okay, Bob, can you hear us?" Dr. Owens asked into the radio.

"Loud and clear, Doc," Bob spoke into his own radio as they watched him maneuver around the lab on the cameras. "Can you hear me back?"

"We hear you," Dr. Owens nodded.

"All right, give me a minute," Bob spoke quietly to himself, typing into the computer as he tried to reset the security locks. "Open sesame...It's open!"

"Okay," Dr. Owens nodded as he spoke into the radio.

"Son of a bitch did it," Hopper whistled, watching Bob on screen with the rest of the group.

"Right, I'll meet you guys outside," Bob called through the radio.

“It’s moving!” Lucas cried as the gate creaked and began sliding back.

“Fuck yeah!” Richie cheered, rushing out of the booth and towards the gate.

“Richie!” Nancy screamed as Richie ran towards the lab building. “Where are you going, you idiot! Stop!”

“We need to get in there,” Richie called over his shoulder.

“Richie, stop!” Nancy cried again as she followed him, the rest of the group chasing after them.

“It’s not safe!” Lucas shouted.

“Stop!” Steve yelled, grabbing one of Richie’s shoulders as he caught up to him. “You have to stop!”

“Let me go!” Richie roared, rounding on Steve angrily.

“You can’t just storm that place without any defense-”

“Fuck off, Harrington,” Richie glared. “Stopping me won’t make Nancy love you back.”

“Hey!” Dustin shouted angrily as Nancy’s face fell and Steve staggered backward as though Richie’s words had burned him.

“That was low, man,” Lucas frowned.

“I don’t give a fuck,” Richie spat. “All I care about is getting in there and making sure my brother and my boyfriend are *safe*!”

Hopper ushered Mike and Eddie out of the building and towards his and Joyce’s vehicles, holding Will’s limp body to his chest.

“Get in the car,” Hopper grunted, depositing Will in the backseat of Joyce’s car. “I’m gonna go get Bob and Joyce. You two *stay here!*”

The two watched as Hopper sprinted back towards the building where Bob and Joyce remained.

“I’ll go with Will,” Mike breathed, already climbing into the backseat

of Joyce's beat up vehicle. "Get in the cruiser!"

"But-"

"Go with Hopper, Eddie," Mike interrupted, giving him a serious look. "He'll keep you safe."

"But, I want to go with Will-"

"Fuck, Eddie," Mike swore, climbing out of the car and placing both hands on Eddie's shoulders. "If anything happens to you Richie will lose his goddamn mind! Go with Hopper, you need to stay safe!"

"Yeah, but you do too-"

"Eddie," Mike groaned, face tilting closer towards Eddie's impatiently as he shook the smaller boy. "Go with Hopper!"

"Fine, okay," Eddie sighed, twisting out of Mike's grip with a frown.

"Go! Go! Go!" came Hopper's booming voice behind them making both boys jump with surprise.

"Where's Bob?" Eddie asked, eyes flitting between Hopper and Joyce.

"Wheeler," Hopper grunted, tossing Mike a set of car keys and ushering a sobbing Joyce into the backseat with her son. "Drive as fast as you fuckin' can! And you, get in the damn cruiser!"

"But, Bob-" Eddie frowned.

"Now!"

"Oh, my God," Eddie murmured as they raced towards the gates at the entrance of the lab's parking lot in Hopper's cruiser. "Richie," Eddie breathed.

"What?" Hopper hissed, focusing on the road.

“RICHIE!” Eddie screamed, as they approached the group of five teenagers by the security gate. “RICHIE! RICHIE!” Eddie wailed, yanking on the door handle and bashing his fist against the passenger window.

“It’s locked, Eddie, it’s locked!” Hopper shouted, leaning over to unlatch the lock Eddie had forgotten he had flicked on as he scrambled into the cruiser with Hopper.

“RICHIE!” Eddie sobbed, throwing the door open as they skidded to a halt in front of the group of teenagers.

“Eds!” Richie cried, rushing forward.

“Get in! Get in!” Hopper commanded, urging the other four to follow Richie’s actions.

“Let’s go! Get in! Come on!” Steve shouted, forcing Richie and Eddie roughly into the back of the cruiser so the other four could squeeze in as well. “GO! GO! GO!”

“Chee,” Eddie sobbed, straddling Richie’s lap and hiding his face in Richie’s neck as they started moving again. “Chee!”

“I’m here,” Richie whispered, his own tears falling into Eddie’s hair as he crushed Eddie against his chest while they sped down the road.

“Chee, I-I-I-” Eddie gasped for breath, choking and coughing as his throat constricted.

“Eddie, no,” Richie cried, tears and snot mixing on his face as he released Eddie enough to lean him back and look at his face. “You’re okay, stop, you’re okay. Where’s your inhaler, baby?”

Eddie continued to cough and wheeze as he grabbed at his chest.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Richie cried, fumbling as he searched Eddie’s pockets for his asthma inhaler, the other five in the truck watching worriedly. “Here, Eds, here!” Richie gasped, fingers wrapping around the familiar plastic tube. Shaking the small dispenser in one hand, Richie took Eddie’s chin in the other before pressing his thumb into Eddie’s jaw to force him to open his mouth.

“Out now, baby,” Richie spoke, hands shaking as he pumped the canister once to prime it while Eddie pushed what little oxygen he had out of his lungs. “Good,” Richie nodded before pushing the plastic mouthpiece into Eddie’s mouth and depressing the trigger. “Okay, in now, one, two, three, four. And hold it one, two, three, four, five, six, seven-”

Eddie pulled away from the plastic inhaler, gasping in breaths of fresh air.

“Better?” Richie asked, stroking Eddie’s wet cheek with his thumb. Eddie nodded, collapsing against Richie’s chest again.

“I love you, Richie!” Eddie sobbed into Richie’s neck. “I love you! I thought I was go-gonna die while we were fighting! I-I thought-” Eddie hiccupped.

“Shh, I love you too, baby,” Richie whispered, squeezing Eddie tightly as his stomach dropped at Eddie’s admission and the idea of losing him. “I love you. It’s okay, you’re okay. I love you too.”

The group rushed into the Byers’ house, Jonathan and Mike carrying Will into his room from Joyce’s car as the others settled around the living room and kitchen.

“How’s Will?” Dustin asked from the table as Mike emerged from Will’s room.

“He’s still out,” Mike answered, grabbing his own seat at the table as Eddie and Richie settled into a couch across from Steve.

“How many people at the lab?!” Hopper shouted into the mouthpiece of the phone, making all of the teenagers jump in surprise. He was on the phone trying to report what had just happened at the lab to authorities. “I don’t know how many people are there! I don’t know how many people are left alive!”

Richie gulped, fingers curling in the back of Eddie’s shirt at Hopper’s words and the reality of the fact that Eddie could have very easily

have lost his life that night.

“Have you contacted the police? I am the police!” Hopper shouted again. “Chief Jim Hopper! Is there a number – yes, fuck! The number I gave you, yes! 6767 – I’ll be here!” he grumbled before slamming the receiver into the cradle.

“They didn’t believe you, did they?” Mike sighed.

“We’ll see,” Hopper shrugged.

“*We’ll see?*” Mike spat. “We can’t just sit here while those *things* are loose!”

“We stay there and wait for help,” Hopper grunted, voice hard and unwavering.

“This is bullshit,” Mike hissed, crossing his arms over his chest and slumping down further in his seat.

The room fell into relative silence, Hopper heading towards the back of the house while Mike sat stewing in anger. Dustin, Lucas, and Max spoke quietly amongst themselves as Richie and Eddie sat curled into one another on one of the Byers’ couches, Eddie straddling Richie’s lap as he clung to his boyfriend’s neck once again.

“What happened to your arms, baby?” Richie hummed, eyeing Eddie’s red and raw forearms.

“I, um,” Eddie stuttered, leaning back to look down at his lap. “I scratched ‘em.”

“They look sore,” Richie commented, trailing his fingers over them lightly. “Cause of the lab?”

“Yeah,” Eddie nodded, chewing his lip to hide his slight smile at the fact that Richie knew him so well. “I was scared. Lots of doctors,” Eddie muttered as Richie pressed soft kisses to the scratched skin before resting his head back against Richie tiredly.

“I’m still mad at you, y’know,” Eddie whispered, lips tickling Richie’s neck as his cheek lay against Richie’s shoulder.

“I know,” Richie nodded, clutching Eddie’s hips and leaning back into Eddie’s hand as his fingers played with Richie’s curls.

“Remember when you used to pretend you were a puppy so I’d pet your hair?” Eddie asked, a soft smile curling his lips as he watched Richie’s quirk through half-lidded eyes.

“Yeah,” Richie laughed softly, tugging Eddie a little closer to his body. “Even in kindergarten, I knew…”

“Knew what, Chee?” Eddie hummed, lazily tracing Richie’s facial features with an index finger.

“That I loved you,” Richie smiled, cheeks slightly pink with embarrassment. “I didn’t understand it at the time, but deep down I knew we were always going to be together… Eds, baby, I’m sorry for the fucked-up shit I said-”

“No, shh,” Eddie protested, pressing his finger to Richie’s lips. “Can we just… pause? Pause the fight until after all this shit is over. When we have time to talk about it, ‘cause I don’t think I’m gonna make it through whatever the hell’s going on without you, Rich.”

“Me neither,” Richie nodded, kissing the fingertip pressed to his lips. “Okay. We’re on pause.”

“I love you,” Eddie sighed, pressing his face to Richie’s neck and wrapping his arms around Richie tightly.

“Love you too, S’ghetti-o,” Richie whispered, pressing a kiss to Eddie’s head.

“Eds?” Richie hummed, squeezing the back of Eddie’s thighs gently. “Eds? baby?”

“Mmf,” Eddie grumbled, nuzzling his face against Richie’s neck as he slept.

“Sleepy boy,” Richie smiled softly, pressing a kiss to the top of Eddie’s head before maneuvering himself into a standing position.

“He sleeping?” Nancy asked, emerging hand in hand from Will’s room with Jonathan.

“Yeah,” Richie nodded, eyeing their clasped hands briefly.

“Why don’t you put him in Will’s bed,” Nancy whispered, placing a hand between Eddie’s shoulder blades and rubbing small circles into his back. “Will’s sleeping too.”

“Okay,” Richie nodded again, moving past the two and shuffling towards Will’s room as he hiked Eddie’s body up his torso further.

Richie’s eyes widened as he took in Will’s pale and sweaty face for the first time. The boy looked like he had been put through the wringer.

Continuing around to the other side of the bed, Richie crouched to gently settle Eddie onto the empty side of Will’s bed. Richie smiled as Eddie whimpered in his sleep, face scrunching and lips pouting sadly as Richie released his grip on Eddie.

“It’s okay,” Richie hummed, reaching up to disentangle Eddie’s fingers from the back of his shirt. Richie moved to place Eddie’s hands on the mattress on either side of himself before smoothing the scrunched skin between Eddie’s eyebrows with the pad of his thumb. “You’re okay,” Richie smiled, leaning down to press a kiss to Eddie’s forehead before standing to leave the boys to rest.

“Mikey,” Richie sighed as he emerged from Will’s room, approaching Mike, who sulked at the kitchen table, for the first time since they'd gotten back from the lab. “You’re okay, you’re okay,” Richie whispered, crouching behind Mike to wrap his arms around his brother’s shoulders and hide his face in Mike’s neck.

“Yeah,” Mike nodded, patting his brother’s forearm comfortingly. “I’m fine.”

“I-I-I,” Richie stuttered, eyes watering as he continued to hide in Mike’s neck, not wanting anyone else to see him cry.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Mike murmured, grasping one of Richie’s wrists near his throat and reaching a hand back to grab at Richie’s curls. “I’m okay, ya dork!”

“Okay,” Richie mumbled into the soft skin of Mike’s neck as he blinked back his tears.

As different as the twins were and as much as they fought, at the end of the day they still *needed* each other.

Richie released Mike with one final sniffle before moving to settle into the vacant chair at the table between Mike and Nancy. Richie pillowed his head on one folded arm and hunched over the table as he rubbed at his red eyes with his other hand.

“Love you,” Nancy told him softly, pecking to top of Richie’s head and petting at his curls, making him smile up at her softly.

“Did you guys know that Bob was the original founder of Hawkins AV?” Mike asked the room quietly after a few beats of silence.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Mike nodded, staring intently at the wooden table top as he traced the grain of the wood with his forefinger. “He petitioned the school to start it and everything. Then he had a fundraiser for equipment.”

“Wow,” Dustin commented softly.

“Mr. Clarke learned everything from him,” Mike swallowed.

“That’s amazing,” Nancy commented sadly.

“Bob *was* amazing,” Mike insisted, looking up at each of the faces staring back at him. “Bob saved us today. He’s the reason we made it out of the lab.”

Richie swallowed as his stomach clenched painfully at Mike’s words.

“We can't let him die in vain,” Mike’s words were strong and unyielding.

“What do you want to do then, Mike?” Lucas sighed. “The Chief's right on this.”

“We can't stop those Demo-dogs on our own,” Dustin nodded.

“Demo-dogs?” Richie snorted, looking up at Dustin with a swollen and red face.

“Demogorgon… dogs,” Dustin spoke carefully, as though explaining something to a child. “Demo-dogs. It's like a compound… A play on words.”

“Wow,” Richie laughed shaking his head.

“I mean,” Dustin sighed, shaking his head at Richie. “When it was just Dart, maybe we could have taken him.”

“But there's an army now,” Lucas finished.

“Exactly,” Dustin nodded.

“Wait…” Mike stopped tracing the grain in the wood. “His army.”

“What?”

“*His* army,” Mike repeated. “Maybe if we stop him, we can stop his army, too!”

“What are you-” Steve groaned.

“The Shadow Monster!” Mike interrupted. “It got Will that day on the field and the doctor said it was like a virus, it infected him!”

“And so this virus,” Max spoke up, trying to understand where Mike’s train of thought was headed. “It's connecting him to the tunnels?”

“To the tunnels,” Mike nodded urgently. “To the monsters, to the Upside Down, to everything!”

“Whoa, what?” Steve groaned. “Slow down!”

“Okay,” Mike groaned in annoyance. “So, the Shadow Monster's inside everything and if the vines feel something like pain, then so

does Will."

"And so does Dart," Dustin added.

"Yeah," Mike nodded. "It's like what Mr. Clarke taught us-"

"The hive mind," Richie murmured, surprising the rest of the teenagers in the room. "What? I remember things," Richie defended himself.

"Okay, so… what's a hive mind?" Steve asked, looking for further explanation.

"It's a collective consciousness." Dustin explained. "Like a super-organism!"

"And this is the thing that controls everything," Mike continued. "It's the brain!"

"Like the Mind Flayer," Dustin gasped, making Mike and Lucas look up at him with wide eyes.

"The *what*?" Max sighed exasperatedly.

"I'm gonna go get Eds," Richie mumbled, pushing himself up from the table.

Richie opened the door quietly, peeking into Will's room and expecting both boys to be asleep.

"Will?" Richie called when he noticed Will sitting up in bed, glaring down at Eddie. "Will?

Richie stepped closer toward the bed, eyebrows scrunched in confusion at the unresponsive Will.

"Will, you okay?" Richie repeated, grabbing the rigid boy's shoulder. Will looked up at Richie, eyes wide and blank.

"Yeah," Will nodded.

“What’s going on?” Richie asked.

“Nothing.”

“Um, I’m just gonna take Eddie-”

“No!” Will growled, taking Eddie’s arm in a vice-like grip, making the sleeping boy whimper in pain.

“Will, let go,” Richie breathed, reaching for Eddie cautiously.

“No!”

“Will, please,” Richie begged, cradling Eddie’s neck with one hand as the other arm wrapped behind Eddie’s back. “You’re hurting him. Let him go, Will!”

Will blinked rapidly, taking in his surroundings before releasing Eddie. As soon as Will had released his grip Richie scooped Eddie up, fleeing the room.

“Richie?” Nancy called as Richie emerged from Will’s room, slamming the bedroom door behind him before leaning back against it. “What’s wrong?” she asked, approaching her panting brother who was hugging Eddie to his chest fiercely.

“Will,” Richie sighed.

“What about him?” Jonathan asked jumping from his chair.

“I-I… I don’t know,” Richie shook his head, eyes squeezed shut as he pressed his nose to the top of Eddie’s head to inhale his boyfriend’s comforting scent. “He just…”

“Richie?” Nancy asked again, moving to place a hand on Eddie’s back which only caused Richie to violently flinch away from her, refusing to let her touch Eddie or himself.

“He was just… watching Eddie when I went in. But he didn’t seem

like he was actually there… his eyes were so *empty*," Richie explained, swallowing hard as he moved to sit on the couch with a sleeping Eddie nestled into his lap. "And then I tried to pick up Eddie and he grabbed him. He looked, he looked like he wanted to *hurt* him," Richie told them hesitantly, voice cracking embarrassingly.

"No," Jonathan shook his head, ready to defend his brother. "There's no-"

"I know what I saw, Jonathan!" Richie hissed angrily.

"Will wouldn't hurt anyone," Jonathan persisted just as angrily.

"That wasn't Will in there," Richie shook his head. "I don't know what's going on but that wasn't Will!"

"Chee?" Eddie whimpered, stirring in Richie's lap.

"Yeah, I'm here," Richie whispered, attention turning to his boyfriend.

"What's going on?" Eddie asked, yawning and stretching his legs across the length of the couch.

"You fell asleep," Richie explained, running his fingers through Eddie's hair and pushing it back from his face.

"Hmm," Eddie hummed, nuzzling his cheek against Richie's chest contentedly.

"We think we figured out what's going on with Will, maybe," Richie told Eddie.

"The Mind Flayer," Dustin announced dramatically, throwing Will's Dungeons and Dragons manual down on the kitchen table in front of the group of teenagers and Sgt. Hopper.

"What the hell is that?" Hopper grunted.

“It's a monster from an unknown dimension,” Dustin explained. “It's so ancient that it doesn't even know it’s true home. It enslaves races of other dimensions by taking over their brains using its highly-developed psionic powers.”

“Oh, my God,” Hopper groaned. “None of this is real! This is a kids' game!”

“No, it's a manual,” Dustin insisted. “And it's not for kids. And unless you know something that we don't, this is the best metaphor-”

“It’s an analogy, Dustin,” Eddie interrupted, eyes scanning the book intently.

“Analogy?” Dustin groaned. “*That's* what you're worried about?”

“Don’t talk to him that way, Dustin,” Richie hissed.

“Fine,” Dustin sighed, rolling his eyes. “It’s an *analogy* for understanding whatever the hell this is!”

“Okay,” Nancy sighed. “So, this Mind Flamer thing-”

“Flayer,” Mike corrected.

“Right, Mind Flayer,” Nancy nodded. “What does it want?”

“To conquer us, basically,” Dustin answered.

“Kinky,” Richie snorted.

“Beep beep,” Eddie hissed, pinching Richie’s bicep.

“Ow!” Richie whined.

“It believes it's the master race,” Dustin continued, ignoring Richie.

“Like the Germans?” Steve asked.

“Uh, you mean the *Nazis*?” Dustin responded incredulously.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Steve nodded, eyes flitting around the room before settling on Nancy embarrassedly. “The Nazis.”

“If the Nazis were from another dimension, totally,” Dustin nodded with an eye roll.

“Oh, my God,” Hopper groaned in annoyance.

“It views other races, like us, as inferior to itself,” Dustin continued.

“Hey, you have something in common with him, Eds,” Richie joked, elbowing Eddie with a smile.

“I swear to God, Rich,” Eddie hissed, trying to appear annoyed despite the fact that his lips were twitching into an amused smile.

“It wants to spread, to take over other dimensions,” Mike added, ignoring Richie once again.

“We are talking about the destruction of our world as we know it,” Lucas continued dramatically.

“Great,” Steve groaned sarcastically. “That's great. That's really great!”

“Okay,” Nancy sighed, trying to stay positive. “So, if this thing is like a brain that's controlling everything, then if we kill it-”

“We kill everything it controls,” Eddie finished.

“We’d win,” Richie added.

“Well, *theoretically*,” Lucas countered.

“Great,” Hopper sighed, taking the manual from Nancy. “So, how do you kill this thing? Shoot it with fireballs or something?”

“No, no, no fireballs.” Dustin shook his head with a laugh. “Uh, you summon an undead army, uh, because because zombies, you know, they don't have brains, and the Mind Flayer, it… It likes brains… Yeah, it's just a game,” he finished lamely, swallowing uncomfortably under Hopper’s intense glare.

“What the hell are we doing here?” Hopper groaned, throwing the book down.

“I thought we were waiting for your military backup!” Dustin called back.

“We are!”

“Even if they come, how are they gonna stop this?” Mike cried. “You can't just shoot this with guns!”

“You don't know that!” Hopper argued back. “We don't know anything!”

“We know it's already killed everybody in that lab,” Eddie spoke quietly, eyes trained on the manual in the centre of the table.

“And we know the monsters are gonna molt again,” Lucas added.

“And we know that it's only a matter of time before those tunnels reach town,” Dustin nodded.

“They're right,” Joyce croaked, emerging from the dark hallway leading to her bedroom. “We have to kill it.”

“Joyce-”

“I want to kill it,” Joyce insisted, shaking her head.

“Me, too, Joyce,” Hopper sighed, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Okay? But how do we do that? We don't exactly know what we're dealing with here.”

“No,” Mike gasped. “But he does! If anyone knows how to destroy this thing, its Will. He's connected to it and he'll know its weaknesses.”

“But, I thought we couldn't trust him anymore,” Max asked with confusion. “That he's a spy for the Mind Flayer now.”

“Yeah, but he can't spy if he doesn't know where he is,” Mike answered with wide and blazing eyes.

“I get why El was your mage now,” Max spoke nervously, ripping up

strips of duct tape as Mike rummaged through the cupboard under the Byers' kitchen sink. The rest of the group had broken off in pairs to prepare the shed for the plan.

"What?"

"Lucas," Max continued. "He told me all about her."

"Yeah, well, he shouldn't have," Mike grunted. "And just because you know the truth, it doesn't mean you're in our party."

"Yeah, I know," Max sighed. "I mean, why would you want a stupid zoomer in your party anyway?"

"What?" Mike asked, looking back at her in confusion.

"I'm just saying. El?" Max paused to rip a piece of tape with her teeth. "She sounds like she was really awesome. I understand why you all miss her so much."

"Yeah, she was," Mike whispered, looking down at his lap. "Until that *thing* took her… Just like it took Bob. Just like it's trying to take Will!"

"We're not gonna let it," Max responded causing Mike nod in agreement. "I promise."

"Eds," Richie sighed, helping Eddie and Hopper clear out the shed. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"I don't care, Rich," Eddie responded, handing him a dusty old box to toss out into the yard.

"Eds-"

"I'm doing this, Richie!" Eddie interrupted. "I have to do this! For Will!"

"Baby," Richie sighed, taking the crate in Eddie's hands and dropping

it to the ground before taking Eddie's dusty hands in his own. The fact that Eddie was helping clear out the dirty old shed was a testament to how serious he was about helping Will. "I know, and you're so wonderful for wanting to do this… But I don't think it's safe."

"None of this is safe, Rich," Eddie rolled his eyes.

"This though," Richie shook his head. "Specifically for you, *this* isn't safe."

"And why not?" Eddie asked, looking up at his boyfriend with a fierce gaze.

"Earlier," Richie started, looking down at his feet nervously as Hopper shifted closer to hear what Richie had to say. "I put you in Will's bed when you were sleeping. When I came back to get you Will was just… staring down at you-"

"That doesn't-"

"But it wasn't Will in there," Richie interrupted. "I know that now, but he was looking at you like, like he wanted to hurt you, Eds. This *thing* wants to hurt you."

"Richie, it's a monster it wants to hurt everyone," Eddie tried to argue.

"No, you didn't see Eds," Richie sniffed slightly, eyes watering. "I think it wants *you*."

"That's ridiculous," Eddie shook his head. "There's no reason-"

"*Please* don't do this, baby," Richie sobbed, pulling Eddie against him and hunching to press his face to Eddie's neck. "Please!"

"Rich," Eddie sighed, surprised at Richie's outburst. He looked over at Hopper who watching them uncomfortably.

"Please!"

"I'm sorry," Eddie whispered, wrapping his arms around Richie's

shaking back. “I’m sorry but I have to.”

“Ready, kid?” Hopper grunted, head poking out of the shed.

“Yeah,” Eddie nodded, turning to face Richie.

“Be careful,” Richie breathed, pulling Eddie against him and wrapping his arms around Eddie’s waist.

“I’ll be fine,” Eddie nodded.

“I love you,” Richie whispered, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

“Hey, stop,” Eddie smiled sadly, gathering the tears with the pads of his thumbs as he cradled Richie’s face between his hands. “I love you, too,” he murmured before pressing his lips to Richie’s.

The sound of Hopper’s uncomfortable cough broke the two apart.

“See you soon,” Eddie whispered, pecking Richie’s lips once again before stepping back out of his boyfriend’s grasp and following Hopper into the old wooden shed to wait for Will to come to.

“What? What? What is this?” Will cried, head lolling as he regained consciousness to find himself strapped to a chair in a dark room. “What? What is this? Why am I tied up?”

“Will, we just wanna talk to you,” Joyce explained to her son gently. “We're not gonna hurt you.”

“Where am I?”

“He doesn’t recognize it,” Eddie whispered happily to Mike who nodded.

“Hey,” Hopper spoke gruffly, moving forward with Will’s drawing of the Mind Flayer in his hand. “Do you recognize this drawing? Do you

recognize this?"

Will shook his head, eyes wide with fear.

"He's scaring him," Mike whispered angrily, watching Hopper interrogate his best friend.

"We wanna help you," Joyce smiled. "But to do that, we have to understand how to kill it."

"Why am I tied up? Why am I tied up? Why am I tied up? Why am I tied up?" Will screamed, face contorted in anger.

Eddie took a startled step backwards as Will screamed, grabbing Mike's forearm in surprise as the lights they had dragged out to the shed flickered in time with Will's shouts.

"Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!"

"Hey!"

"Will!"

"Hey, stop!"

"Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!"

"Will, sweetie," Joyce sighed as Will's screaming ceased, the boy slumping tiredly. "Do you know what March 22nd is?" Joyce asked, pausing as Will stared blankly at her.

"It's your birthday," she smiled tentatively. "When you turned eight, I gave you that huge box of crayons. Do you remember that? It was 120 colors."

Eddie covered his mouth as a whimper left it at Joyce's soft words.

"And all your friends, they got you Star Wars toys, but all you wanted to do was draw with all your new colors," Joyce laughed wetly. "And you drew this big spaceship, but it wasn't from a movie, it was your spaceship. A rainbow ship is what you called it. And you must have

used every color in the box. I took that with me to Melvald's and I put it up and I told everyone who came in, 'My son drew this!'… You were so embarrassed, but I was so proud. I was so, so proud."

Jonathan moved forward then, placing a hand on his mother's shoulder as she stared into Will's wide eyes.

"Do you remember the day Dad left?" Jonathan asked, voice cracking with emotion. "We stayed up all night building Castle Byers just the way you drew it. And it took so long because you were so bad at hammering… You'd miss the nail every time. And then it started raining, but we stayed out there anyway. We were both sick for like a week after that. But we just had to finish it, didn't we? We just had to!"

"Do you remember the first day that we met?" Mike spoke up, stepping forward and in line with Jonathan. "We were in kindergarten and I was upset because Richie and Eddie were playing on the see-saw and there was no space for me."

Eddie frowned at Mike's words, clutching his neck nervously.

"I felt like I had no friends and no one liked me… not even my own brother," Mike swallowed. "I just felt so alone and so scared, but I saw you on the swings and you were alone, too. You were just swinging by yourself and I just walked up to you and I asked, I asked if you wanted to be my friend. And you said yes. It was the best thing I've ever done."

"And that's the kind of person you are, Will," Eddie spoke quietly, moving forward as well. "You are so kind. You're willing to be *anyone's* friend."

Mike nodded, smiling at Eddie.

"Do you remember when Richie and I first started dating?" Eddie asked, cheeks pink with embarrassment over sharing the memory in front of Joyce and Hopper. "People had always called us horrible things but when we *actually* finally started properly dating… school was *hell*. I had my friends and I had Richie but people were so hateful… still are," he added with a sniff.

“The day after people at school found out I was at my locker between classes,” Eddie took a deep breath. “I was alone and I wasn’t paying attention and Bowers and Harrington came up behind me and shoved me against my locker. I hit my face and I was bleeding and crying and the whole hallway just watched as they shouted *cruel* things at me… I was so embarrassed and scared and no one did anything but watch. Except you,” Eddie smiled.

“You stood up for me and told them to back off. Of course, they also kicked your ass,” Eddie laughed. “But you *tried* to help me and that meant more than anything to me… Do you remember what you told me last week?”

Eddie sighed when Will continued to stare at him blankly.

“You told me one of your deepest secrets. You trusted me with that and I’ve never been so honoured to be someone’s friend because you are just so kind and *good* and special, Will. And I need you, so please. Come back to me.”

“Will, baby,” Joyce spoke up. “if you're in there, just please, *please* talk to us. Please, honey, can you do that for me? *Please*!”

“Let me go,” Will whispered in a voice that didn’t sound like his own.

“What happened?” Dustin asked as soon as Hopper and Mike entered the house.

“Where’s Eddie?” Richie asked, looking over Mike’s shoulder in search of his boyfriend.

“He’s fine,” Mike promised, giving Richie a meaningful look.

“I think he's talking, just not with words,” Hopper explained as he sat at the kitchen table, grabbing the pen and the old envelope sitting on the table before flipping it to write on the back of it.

“What are you writing?” Steve asked in confusion as they all crowded around Hopper as he wrote on the envelope.

“Morse code,” the rest of the group answered making Steve blush embarrassedly.

“H-E-R-E,” Hopper spelt out.

“Here,” Richie breathed.

“Glad to know you can spell four letter words, Richie,” Dustin snorted.

“Fuck off,” Richie laughed.

“Guys,” Mike sighed, trying to get them back on track.

“Sorry,” they answered in unison.

“Will's still in there,” Hopper breathed. “He's talking to us.”

“Here,” Mike handed Jonathan the boom box from Jonathan’s room with the The Clash song already cued up on the tape.

“Thanks,” Jonathan nodded, accepting the machine in understanding. “Do you remember the first time I played you this?” Jonathan asked as he pressed play, the sounds of The Clash flooding the small area.

“What’s going on?” Eddie hissed to Mike.

“He’s still in there and he’s tapping out Morse code,” Mike whispered back discretely. “We gotta keep the Mind Flayer distracted so Will can talk to us.”

“Fuck,” Eddie breathed shaking his head.

“E!” Lucas cried as they translated the final letter in Will’s message.

“What’s it say?” Richie asked as they all rushed to stand behind Nancy who was writing down the letters.

“Close gate,” the all read together just as the house phone began ringing.

“Shit!” Dustin shouted, rushing forward to pick up and slam the ringing phone down to quiet it only for it to start ringing again.

“What the fuck!”

“Ugh,” Nancy grunted, ripping the phone from the wall and smashing it on the ground.

“Do you think he heard?” Max asked worriedly, voicing everyone’s fear.

“It’s just a phone,” Steve shook his head determinedly. “It could be anywhere. Right?”

“Fuck,” Eddie breathed as the ringing phone could be heard from outside the shed. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Will?” Joyce asked warily, holding her son’s face in her hands. “Will, can you hear me?”

The boy suddenly began contorting, eyes closed and breathing rapid.

“It knows,” Hopper grunted. “It knows where we are.”

“Shit!”

Eddie rushed forward, grabbing the syringe of tranquilizer they had brought from the lab before moving forward to plunge it into Will’s arm in a panic. Eddie dropped the syringe in surprise, as though only just realizing his actions once Will flopped forward as he lost consciousness.

“Shit,” Eddie breathed. “Oh, my God! I-”

“No, Eddie,” Joyce shook her head, placing a hand on his shoulder comfortingly. “It’s okay, that was good thinking!”

“Do you hear that?” Mike whispered as a familiar cry rang out in the air around them.

“Yeah, it sounds like-”

“Eddie!” Richie screamed, barrelling through the door to the shed. “We gotta get inside. Now!”

All nine teenagers crowded around the couch, peering out of the window as they listened to the sounds of Demogorgons cry.

“Hey, get away from the windows!” Hopper commanded as he entered the room with Joyce, loading a shot gun.

They all scrambled into the centre of the room, shuffling nervously.

“Do you know how to use this?” Hopper asked Jonathan, holding out the shotgun.

“What?”

“Can you use this?” Hopper shouted impatiently.

“I can,” Nancy stepped forward, taking the weapon from the burly man.

The group clustered in the centre of the room, each collecting various items from around the house to be used as weapons as Hopper and Nancy cocked their guns and Steve gripped his bat tightly.

“You okay?” Richie asked, squeezing Eddie’s hand as his other hand gripped a heavy cast iron pan from the kitchen. Eddie nodded sharply in response, eyes trained on the front window.

The Demogorgon crying had briefly stopped leaving them in an eerily silence, the only sound being the heavy breathing of the group.

“Holy shit!” Richie screamed as the front window smashed open and Hopper and Nancy released instinctive shots.

“Holy shit!” Dustin repeated as they all stared at the Demogorgon body that had come flying through the window.

“Is it dead?” Max whispered as Hopper approached the unmoving creature cautiously.

“Yeah,” he nodded as he kicked it with the toe of his boot.

The group jumped, turning to look back at the front door as a creaking sound on the porch rang out. Richie swallowed nervously, gripping Eddie’s hand tightly as he pulled the smaller boy slightly behind himself. They all watched as the lock flipped and the chain on the door slid open of its own accord.

“No,” Eddie breathed, brain putting the puzzle pieces together as the door slowly creaked open. “Oh, my God!”

“El,” Mike choked, stumbling forward as the missing girl stepped into the doorframe, blood oozing out of her nose.